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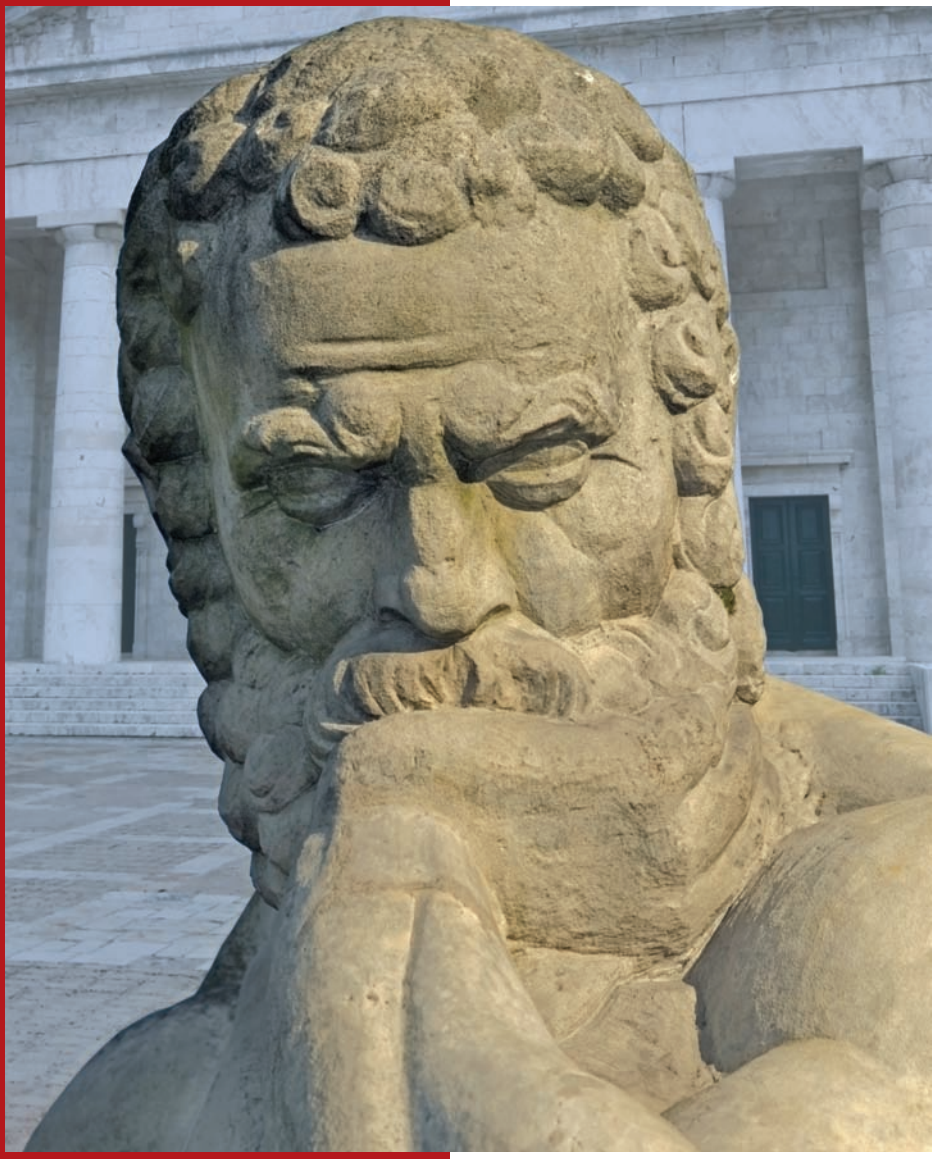
ETHICS:
A HISTORY OF MORAL THOUGHT
COURSE GUIDE



Professor Peter Kreeft
BOSTON COLLEGE

Ethics:
A History of Moral Thought

Professor Peter Kreeft
Boston College

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Ethics:
A History of Moral Thought

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Course Syllabus

Ethics
The History of Moral Thought and Ethics

Consider this . . .

Throughout this course there are questions for your consideration. It may be helpful for you to write a short essay on one or two of these questions from each lecture. This will give you a better understanding of the ways in which the issues raised in these lectures impact your own life and world.

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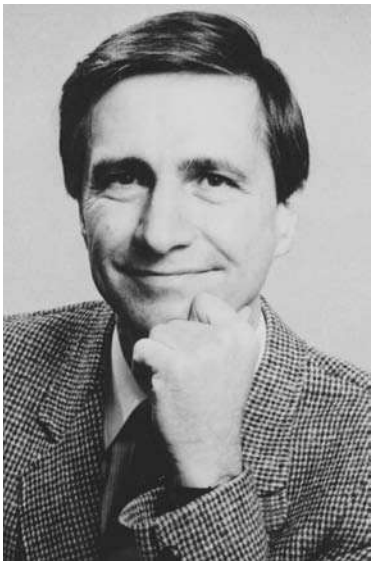

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About Your Professor

Peter Kreeft

Peter Kreeft is a professor of Philosophy at Boston University. He has written over 40 books including *Fundamentals of the Faith, The Best Things in Life, Back to Virtue,* and *The Unaborted Socrates*. Besides writing, Kreeft contributes to Christian publications and speaks at numerous conferences. He received his bachelor's degree from Calvin College and his Ph.D. from Fordham University. Before teaching at B.U., he taught at Villanova University for three years. Kreeft has been at Boston University for 38 years.

Introduction

This course addresses some of the eternal questions that man has grappled with since the beginning of time. What is good? What is bad? Why is justice important? Why is it better to be good and just than it is to be bad and unjust? Most human beings have the faculty to discern between right and wrong, good and bad behavior, and to make judgment over what is just and what is unjust. But why are ethics important to us? This course looks at our history as ethical beings. We'll travel into the very heart of mankind's greatest philosophical dilemmas—to the origins of our moral values and the problem of ethics. Are ethics universal, absolute and unchanging—or are they culturally relative, changing, and man made? Furthermore, we'll delve into the creation of ethical systems—not just for ourselves, but also for society at large. And we will consider the ongoing process of establishing ethical frameworks for society.

Lecture 1: Being Good and Everything Else: An Introduction

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Peter Kreeft's *Philosophy 101: An Introduction to Philosophy* through the *Apology* of Socrates.

Introduction

The philosopher William James separated questions into DEAD issues and LIVE issues. For example: Are we good or evil? Is there a God? Is there life after death? Are we free or determined? **In this lecture we focus on the LIVE issues or the BIG QUESTIONS**.

"Arguing Forward" and "Arguing Backward"

In the study of Ethics there is a process that can be called "*Arguing Forward."* This form of thinking involves the application of principles to situations. The technical term for this is CASUISTRY. We can think of this as the resolving of specific cases of conscience or duty or conduct through application of ethical principles. Questions that could be argued "forward" are ones such as: Are certain wars just? Is abortion just? etc. On the other hand, what this course is concerned with is *"Arguing Backward."* This form of thinking involves exploring the *foundations* of our principles.

It can be assumed that as humans we agree upon at least some important general principles of Ethics. For example:

Complications arise when one attempts two things:

Things Considered "Good"	Things Considered "Bad"
Justice	Injustice
Kindness	Cruelty
Wisdom	Folly
Freedom	Slavery
Respect	Selfishness
Peace	Murder
Courage	Cowardice
Love	Hatred
Hope	Despair

1. Tries to apply these values to complex situations. i.e. Casuistry
2. Tries to justify and explain these principles and their foundations.

The process of "Arguing Forward" (#1) does not require the study of the history of ethical thought while "Arguing Backward" (#2) does.

There are two reasons to use history as a tool to "arguing backward:"

1. The wisest philosophers in our history (Solomon, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Pascal, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, et al) speak to us and for us. They are involved in the way we think, whether we know it or not. They are our teachers.
2. "There is nothing new under the sun"—even when we consider "modern" issues such as genetics, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, etc,. At the heart of all these problems, both their theory and practice, we find perennial principles.

Where Do Our Moral Values Come From?

This question is the most basic and important in the study of ethics and it has two possible answers: that values are OBJECTIVE or SUBJECTIVE. Do we discover these values as a scientist would, in objective reality or do we create these values like the rules of a game or a work of art?

Looking at history, we can see that pre-modern societies saw these values as objective, and as universal, absolute and unchanging, and it wasn't until the advent of the modern Western society that philosophers began to claim them to be subjective, meaning that they are culturally relative, changing and man made. These two viewpoints continue today and are highly critical of one another.

The Argument Continues.

If we start with this definition and say our moral values are objective and that we discover them instead of inventing them, we must ask—*Where do we find them?* If they are "natural" rather than "artificial," we have to find them in nature. We don't find them in *physical* nature. But if we define nature as including HUMAN nature, we then are forced to ask if human nature is unchanging. If we answer that question 'no,' that human nature is not unchanging, then objective, and unchanging, moral values cannot come from humans. If this is true, then we have not answered our original question: Where do our moral values come from?

Socrates as an Example of the True Philosopher

Socrates, the "Father of Philosophy," believed there were objective moral values, but thought it was very hard to prove them. He was neither a dogmatist nor a skeptic and this is what propelled him to ask questions. Neither a dogmatist nor a skeptic asks questions, for the dogmatist thinks he already has all the answers and the skeptic thinks there aren't any.

Seven Things Ethics Is Not

1. Ethics is not a "check up." It is not a checklist of rules that determine whether or not something is right or wrong. Instead it is an investigation into real and substantial questions of eternal importance. (What is a good person?)

2. Ethics (or "morals") are NOT the same as "mores." Mores are how we *do* behave, morals are how we *ought* to behave. Mores, or social norms, are facts, whereas morals are values. Mores are patterns of behavior, whereas morals are principles of behavior. Mores are common to both man and beast, while morals are proper to man alone. This point corresponds to the distinction between Shame (mores) and Guilt (morals). Shame is social and guilt is individual. Dogs feel shame, but not guilt.
3. Ethics is not psychology. Ethics is not about feelings.
4. Ethics is not ideology.
5. Ethics is not the same as Meta-Ethics. Ethics is thinking about Good and Evil. Meta-Ethics is thinking about Ethics.
6. Basic Ethics is not Applied Ethics (casuistry). Ethics is like theoretical science while applied ethics is like technology.
7. Ethics is not religion. One does not need religious faith to study ethics.

"If you're never confused, you're either God or an animal, but you're not a philosopher."

Just What Is Ethics, Then?

Ethics is about three things:

1. Good—the thing desired, the ideal
2. Right—the opposite of wrong as defined by some law
3. Ought—personal obligation, duty, responsibility

These are the three ethical dimensions of any question. But what are the questions? A good way to understand the questions Ethics asks is by using a metaphor supplied by C.S. Lewis in which we are a fleet of ships and ethics are our sailing orders. These orders tell the ships (us) three things:

1. How to cooperate with one another and thus avoid bumping into to each other. This is Social Ethics.
2. How to keep each ship afloat and in good condition. This is Individual Ethics or Virtue Ethics. It asks the questions: What is a good person? What is moral character?
3. What the ship's mission is. This is the most important "order" of all, for it gives us our ultimate purpose and goal in life. If we don't know or care where we are going, it doesn't make a difference what road we choose. (QUO VADIS?)

Consider this . . .

How does ethics depend on metaphysics (the study of what is and is not *real*), anthropology (the study of *human nature*) and epistemology (the study of *how we know*)?

SOCRATES

Socrates has become one of the cultural touchstones by which we measure ourselves and our achievements, a thoroughly real-life figure who has also become almost a mystic figure, as well as the wise man of all wise men, though that is a designation he took great pains to qualify, if not precisely to deny.

Socrates' was a long life and could have been longer. He was born in 470 or 469 B.C. and, notoriously, was executed for impiety and for corrupting youth (not least among them Alcibiades) by the restored Athenian democracy in 399. He wrote nothing. But his disciples and hangers-on did, including Plato, above all, but Xenophon too. And his critics wrote about him as well, most notably the comic playwright Aristophanes, who pilloried him mercilessly in *The Clouds*, in which Socrates attempts to ascend heavenward and literally gets stuck—on stage—in a basket. He was the subject of constant comment.

Socrates is probably most famous as a martyr to philosophy. Plato's account of Socrates' trial, last days, and execution, rejecting schemes for his escape and, when the time comes, calmly drinking the fatal cup of proffered hemlock, is deservedly a staple of undergraduate education in the liberal arts.

Pinning down what Socrates actually thought, though, is difficult. Clearly he thought of himself as a "lover of wisdom," which is, of course, what the word "philosopher" means. But what does it mean to be a lover of wisdom? That perhaps is not so clear. What exactly does wisdom consist of? That is just the sort of question that Socrates asked, consistently refusing to give direct answers to such questions himself.

Socrates was, from one vantage point, a master of irony, someone who systematically said what he didn't mean in order to convey his meaning. So said Alcibiades at the symposium, or drinking party, which was the occasion of one of Plato's greatest dialogues, perhaps the greatest of them all.

Alcibiades' vision is precisely what Socrates sought to evoke by means of the famous Socratic method of question and answer, the famous Socratic dialectic. The people with whom Socrates spoke claim to know something. He asked questions. It turned out that they did not know. They tried again. He asked more questions. They still didn't know. And on and on the process went. It must have been immensely irritating to some of those with whom Socrates spoke. But to others, and just as clearly, it was life-transforming.

Socrates knew exactly what he was doing. The key lies, paradoxically, in the title he was willing to claim for himself, that of a "lover of wisdom." We ordinarily think of wisdom as something like deep practical knowledge on stilts. It is not a very useful word as we employ it, because by convention it refers to something that, following Socrates, no one is willing to claim, and that we are hesitant even to attribute to others. Socrates was, in short and in his way, something closer to a religious teacher than what we ordinarily think of as a philosopher.

(Source: Audio Lecture "Foundations of Western Civilization" ©2003 by Timothy B. Shutt)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter. *Philosophy 101: An Introduction to Philosophy*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Brickhouse, Thomas C., Nicholas D. Smith. *Philosophy of Socrates*. New York: Westview Press, 1999.

Gelb, Michael J., Ronald Gross. *Socrates Way: Seven Keys to Using Your Mind to the Utmost*. New York: Tarcher, 2002

Kreeft, Peter and Trent Dougherty. *Socratic Logic: A Logic Text Using Socratic Method, Platonic Questions, and Aristotelian Principles*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2001.

Websites to Visit

1. http://www.peterkreeft.com/about.htm - Professor Kreeft's website containing additional writings, a list of the books he's authored, his lecture schedule and other resources.
2. http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/ - The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
3. http://www.philosophypages.com/ - Philosophy Pages. This site offers helpful information for students of the Western philosophical tradition. The elements you will find on this site include: *The Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names*; a survey of the history of Western philosophy; a timeline for the intellectual figures discussed here; detailed discussion of several major philosophers; summary treatment of the elementary principles of logic; a generic study guide for students of philosophy; and links to other philosophy sites on the Internet.

Lecture 2: Being Good and Being Traditional: Why Do We Call It "Ancient Wisdom?"

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Mortimer J. Adler's *Aristotle for Everybody: Difficult Thought Made Easy* and Peter Kreeft's *Making Choices: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Moral Decisions*.

Introduction:

We often use the term "ancient wisdom" to describe philosophies of pre-modern times in contrast to "modern knowledge." Why is this? Are we less "wise" than we once were? A summary of the most important points in pre-modern ethical wisdom and the differences on those points in relation to contemporary conventional wisdom might show us some reasons for this judgment.

Twelve Important Differences Between Typically Ancient and Typically Modern Ethical Philosophies

1. For the ancients, Ethics comes first. They saw ethics as the single most important ingredient in a good life. Virtue for them was considered essential while it has often become an afterthought for modern man. For the ancients morality is not a means to an end, it IS the end.
2. Within "ancient wisdom" is a profound respect for tradition and authority. To the ancients the idea of conformity to tradition was not a negative idea. Over the last 500 years, however, Western culture has made conformity a very unpopular word. New moralities have sprung up everywhere. Man now often believes in creating his own values, and different cultures create different values. The ancients were not cultural relativists. They thought you could no more create or invent a new morality than a new universe or color. The ancients believed in an obedience or conformity to authority not in the sense of "power" but of "goodness." They believed that right makes might, not that might makes right.
3. The ancients did ethics by reason and with the mind not with feelings or emotion as is often done in the modern world. The ancients believed the maxim—"LIVE ACCORDING TO REASON."
4. Ancient ethics was more connected to religion, while modern ethics is more deliberately secular. Religion had a virtual monopoly in most ancient societies and there was a religious consensus that no longer exists. Modern society is much more pluralistic and tolerant, in no small part due to the suffering it has witnessed in the form of religious war

"Keep your mind with all diligence for out of it are all the issues of life." —Solomon

and strife over the centuries. It is for this reason that modern philosophy tends to shy away from ethical questions that seem to have a religious undercurrent to them e.g. What is the meaning of life? But historically, religion has always been the strongest source of morality. Dostoevski said, “If God does not exist everything is permissible.” Most of our ancestors did not think an atheist could be ethical, but many today would disagree with this.

5. Because of their deeper concept of happiness as objective perfection and not just subjective contentment, and their deeper concept of ethics as not just rules but virtues, the ancients did not contrast *ethics* and *happiness* as we often do today. Ethics was not a set of rules that interfered with what you felt like doing and thus with your happiness. Rather, ethics was a roadmap to the country of true happiness.
6. All ancients based their ethics on human nature. This is one of the meanings of the term “natural law.” It is true that different ancients thought differently about the nature of “human nature.” For instance:
    i. Epicurus, Lucretius and their followers thought human nature was much the same as animal nature, and therefore deduced the ethical conclusion that the highest values were pleasure, comfort and peace.
    ii. Plato, Plotinus and their followers thought human nature was essentially the same as the nature of the gods or spirits, and so came to the conclusion that the only true values were spiritual and not material.
    iii. Aristotle and his followers thought human nature was neither the same as the animals’ nor the gods’ but both at the same time, and deduced that both spiritual goods like wisdom and virtue and material goods like pleasure and wealth counted.

    However, moderns tend to be skeptical of basing ethics on any philosophical anthropology or view of human nature. Modern philosophers tend to base their ethics either on desire and satisfaction—calculating the consequences of an act in terms of the greatest satisfaction for the greatest number of people (*Utilitarianism*)—or on a justice which is not based on human nature but on pure reason abstracted from experience and human nature. Philosopher Immanuel Kant posted this latter idea and based all of ethics on “The Golden Rule”—*Do unto others whatever you want them to do to you*.
7. For the ancients the most important question in ethics was not how to treat other people, or how to have a just society, or how to improve the world, or even how to be a good person, or what virtues to have (all these questions were of course important) but the most important question was the question of the meaning of life. What was life’s ultimate purpose or final goal or greatest good *summum bonum*? This question can’t be dealt with by modern scientific reasoning. If the scientific method is the only reliable method for finding the truth it is impossible to prove what is “good.” Moderns sharply distinguish questions of (scientific) “fact” from questions of (moral) “value.”
8. Most of the ancients believed that politics was social ethics. This

Consider this . . .

What are the differences between a materialist, a spiritualist, and a dualist in respect to the importance placed on scientific reasoning?

meant that there was no radical difference between societal and individual ethics. The aim of society according to ancient philosophers was virtue. Almost no major modern political philosopher believes that. It was Machiavelli who effected this change. Most modern systems of political philosophy are modifications and revisions of the Machiavellian revolution.

9. Most of the ancients believed that human nature had both good and evil tendencies in it. Many moderns believe this too, but three other views have become more popular which were rare in ancient philosophy:
    i. The idea of Pessimism, that man is innately bad and it takes force to make him act well. In this case, ethics is unnatural and acts as a curbing agent to rectify the essential badness of man. Machiavelli and Hobbes are representative of this view.
    ii. The idea that we *have* no essence. Human nature is just a word that is ever-changing and malleable. Marxism, Deconstructionism, and Sartre's Existentialism are examples of this view.
    iii. The idea of optimism, which holds that man is innately good, but may act badly when a victim of circumstance and social structure. Rousseau is the original proponent of this view.
10. Moderns tend to rely on science as being more reliable than religion. Thus the ethics of the typically modern philosopher has changed from a basically religious ethic to a scientific ethic.

Consider this . . .

Can ethics be scientific? How does modern man's massive accomplishments in the world of technology affect ethics?

11. In ancient philosophies, ethics was based on metaphysics. Ethics, or your "life view," depended on your "world view," or metaphysics. Modern philosophers usually attempt to do ethics without metaphysics.
12. Most of the ancients would say that what makes a society survive and prosper is ethics. A modern would say it is economics. Plato's *Republic* has only one paragraph about economics and ten books about ethics. The irony is that modern society gives an average individual more freedom, more money and more knowledge than any ancient society ever did, but it gives that individual far less moral meaning.

We must choose between the ancient and the modern ways of thinking about ethics in each of these 12 ways within ourselves and our society. And to do that we must force ourselves to think for ourselves. We must all, in a sense, be philosophers.

Consider this . . .

Can the mind make you a better person? Can philosophy help you to not only understand what is the "good life," but also to live it?

NOTES

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Adler, Mortimer J. *Aristotle for Everybody: Difficult Thought Made Easy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

Kreeft, Peter. *Making Choices: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Moral Decisions*. Cincinnati, OH: Saint Anthony Messenger Press & Franciscan Communications, 1997.

Other Books of Interest

Loux, Michael J. *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Websites to Visit

1. http://mally.stanford.edu/ - Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford University. Detailed discussions about metaphysics as the attempt to discover the laws that systematize the fundamental abstract objects presupposed by physical science.
2. http://www.reviewofmetaphysics.org/ - Website of *The Review of Metaphysics.* It is ". . . devoted to the promotion of technically competent, definitive contributions to philosophical knowledge. Not associated with any school or group, not the organ of any association or institution, it is interested in persistent, resolute inquiries into root questions, regardless of the writer's affiliations."

Lecture 3: Being Good and Being Wise: Can Virtue Be Taught?

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read the *Meno* by Plato.

Socrates

Socrates was born in the 5th Century B.C., during the Golden Age of Athens. He died in 399 B.C., at 70, condemned to death by a jury of 501 citizens for the crime of not believing in the gods of the State.

All philosophy stems from Socrates and at least half of Western Culture has been influenced strongly by the teachings of Socrates. He was the first person in history to have a clear idea of what constituted a logical argument.

Interestingly, Socrates chose to apply his methods of argument and deduction to only one subject—ethics. His most important and essential teaching in this realm states two things:

1. Virtue is knowledge.
2. Vice is ignorance.

Socrates' *Apology*

Apologetics is the art of defending one's belief and has nothing to do with an admission of any sort of guilt. In Socrates' "Apology" he describes how it is that he became a philosopher. On trial for the charge of impiety, Socrates tells a story to prove that, on the contrary, he is devoutly pious.

The Oracle of Delphi, when asked if there was anyone wiser than Socrates answered that there was not. Socrates was astounded by this answer because he knew he had no wisdom. Instead of dismissing the Oracle as a fraud, he assumed that no god could lie, and therefore she had spoken the truth. He demanded to know the meaning of this riddle. He tried to find someone wiser than himself, but was never able to find anyone. What he found was that many people *thought* that they had wisdom but under his cross examination he discovered that none of these people did in fact possess true wisdom.

Socrates himself had no wisdom, but he found that no one was wiser than he because he at least knew he had no wisdom while everyone else thought they did. It was the Oracle that coaxed Socrates into developing his method of questioning, and thus it was this god that turned him into a philosopher.

"Lesson One" in Socratic Teaching

There are only two kinds of people:

1. Fools, who think they are wise
   and
2. The wise, who know they are fools.

"Lesson One" and Ethics

The first step to moral virtue is to know yourself and know how unwise you are. This search for the wisdom you know you don't have is the beginning of philosophy. "Philosophy" means the "love of wisdom."

Consider this . . .

Why is it hard to *"know thyself?"*

The Paradox of Socrates' Death

Socrates says: "*If you kill me, you will not harm me but yourselves, for the eternal law makes it impossible that the good man ever be harmed by a bad one*." What did he mean? *He* is a good man being harmed by bad men. Socrates was the most pious man Athens ever produced and ironically the only one that was executed for impiety. If you would ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Socrates would answer this by simply saying, "They never do." Evil cannot be done to a good man because of what man is, because of his essence. Like the Oracle, Socrates gives us a riddle:

Q. What can't be taken from a good man?

A. His virtue and his wisdom.

Q. Where is his virtue and his wisdom? In his reputation? In his possessions? In his body?

A. No. In his SOUL.

Socrates discovered that the true self is the soul. His answer to Apollo's riddle "*Know Thyself*" is that the self is the soul. This is why no evil can happen to you, and why bad people can't harm good people. Evil that happens to you comes from the outside and can only harm your body. The only evil that harms your very self comes from you. No one else can make you foolish and wicked, and no one else but yourself can make you wise and virtuous.

"I am the captain of my soul."
from* Invictus *—W.E. Henley

This concept is a radical thought revolution in the history of human consciousness.

If happiness comes from goodness, from having a good self, then happiness can not just happen, it is chosen. We are responsible for our own happiness.

Three Assumptions and Their Results

1. We always seek *our own good* and not our own harm. We always seek happiness.

2. If you know yourself, then you know that the self is the soul and your own true good is the *good of your soul*.
3. If you know your soul well enough, then you know that virtue is the only way to happiness because *virtue is the "health of the soul*."

If we know these three things and do not doubt them, we will always do good and never evil. This is how Socrates sees the mind as the key to being good. Knowledge of what it is to be a human being is wisdom.

The Place of Reason

The ancient Greeks defined man as the rational animal. Reason is what they believed distinguished man from all the other animals. To the modern man this definition seems rather narrow because we associate reason with something that computers do. The meaning of the term 'reason' has narrowed radically since the dawn of the scientific revolution. When Socrates calls reason the key to practicing virtue, he is speaking of *understanding*. If you really understand that you are essentially your soul and that the happiness of your soul comes only through virtue, then you will love virtue, as you love yourself and happiness. If you don't love virtue that way and you love vice instead, it must be because you don't really understand. Evil only comes when reason is not working properly. If ignorance is the cause of evil then wisdom is the cure. One can remove the effect of evil by removing the cause (ignorance), and since philosophy is the love of wisdom it is the cure for moral evil.That was Socrates' conviction, and he died defending it.

Is There Anything Wrong with Socrates' Argument?

The mind does play an indispensable part in both good and evil. Animals are not moral agents because they do not have rational or self-conscious minds. Without such a mind there is no moral good or evil. But is the mind the only factor? What is missing? What *causes* a lack of wisdom? Do we not have two warring factions at play within us? One voice comes from our reason or consciousness (in Freudian terms, Super Ego) and the other voice comes from our desires (in Freudian terms, the Id). It is you that cast the deciding vote between these two. The I (in Freudian terms, the Ego) chooses between these two voices. The I, or ego, is the *will*. Your will commands your mind to turn to one side or the other. You are responsible then, not just for your actions but for your thoughts.

Consider this . . .

How much can the mind do to make us good? Can virtue be taught at all? Can we have moral education? Should our schools be making their students not only smarter but better people?

Plato's *Meno*

Meno asks Socrates, "Can virtue be taught, or does it come to us in some other way? Do we get virtue by:

1. Teaching
2. Habit and practice
3. Innately, by nature
4. By going against nature

These four ways in which we might become virtuous correspond to the four main answers that would appear in the next 2400 years in the West and in the East. Do we get virtue by teaching? By habit? By nature? Or against nature?

Most optimistic	By nature	Rousseau's answer
Less optimistic	By teaching	Plato's answer
Even less optimistic	By work/practice	Aristotle's answer
Pessimistic	By force/against nature	Machievelli/Hobbes' answer

Consider this . . .

Identify four people in fiction or history who exemplify these four answers in their lives.

There are two questions involved in the *Meno*; both are in the very first line:

1. Can you (Socrates) tell me what I want to know?
2. Can virtue be taught?

In the dialogue Socrates gives a definite answer to the first question but not the second. He doesn't answer questions, he asks them. He doesn't tell, he teaches. We must find the answer ourselves. He says to begin with, he does not know, but we must follow a logical order to find out. We cannot know whether virtue can be taught until we know what virtue is. Socrates goes on to show that we don't know what virtue is even if we think we do. All of Meno's definitions are shown to be inadequate. So Meno attempts to use the skeptical argument that no one can ever know the truth with certainty anyway, so why bother? Socrates refutes this skepticism by showing that everyone has a hidden storehouse of wisdom in the mind. He says that learning is really remembering what we might call "unconscious knowledge." Socrates' method of logical questioning allows us to bring this information up from the depths of our unconscious.

LEARNING IS REMEMBERING

Instead of giving Meno any answers, Socrates takes both sides of the dialogue and first proves that virtue is knowledge and can therefore be taught. But he then proves that virtue cannot be taught because there are no teachers of it, and so it is not knowledge. At the end of the dialogue he suggests that virtue is neither certain knowledge nor mere ignorance but "right belief,"

a sort of *quasi*-knowledge. It is neither simply teachable, like geometry, nor not teachable at all, but teachable in a way. He says that only God can teach it but that we can help. We can be "Socratic."

The Relationship Between Philosophy and Religion

Socrates suggests that virtue is right opinion or right belief. The Greek for this is interesting:

ORTHOS = Right DOXA= Belief

ORTHODOXY = Right Belief

Virtue then seems to be a kind of faith. Socrates seems to say that if you really believe that you are a soul, and that virtue makes you happy, then that will work as well as knowledge. Virtue then can be a knowledge by faith rather than a knowledge by reason and proof.

Consider this . . .

Is ethics dependent on religion? Is it an alternative to religion? Is it a different kind of religion?

PLATO

A Greek philosopher whose writings form the basis of much of Western philosophy, Plato was a student of Socrates. Following the trial and death of Socrates in 399 B.C., Plato traveled extensively in Egypt, Italy, and Sicily. Upon his return to Athens, he founded a famous school of philosophy called the Academy, where he taught the young philosopher Aristotle.

Plato wrote of philosophy in the form of dialogues, in which Socrates interrogates another person, deconstructing their arguments. The most famous dialogues include *Gorgias,* on rhetoric; *Phaedo,* on death and the immortality of the soul; the *Symposium,* on the nature of love; and the *Republic,* on justice. It is often difficult to distinguish whether the ideas shared in the dialogues are those of Plato or Socrates, as the opinions expressed in the dialogues changed over the course of Plato's life. Scholars generally agree that opinions expressed in the early writings are likely to be Socrates', while those of the later writings are Plato's.

Grounded in Socrates' teachings, Plato's philosophical system (Platonism) is intensely concerned with the quality of human life and contains a persistent ethical thread. Plato believed in absolute values rooted in an external world. This idea distinguished him from both his predecessors and successors.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter. *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1997.

Plato, W.H. Rouse (trans.). *Great Dialogues of Plato: Complete Texts of the Republic, Apology, Crito Phaido, Ion and Meno, Vol. 1*. New York: Signet Classics, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Klein, Jacob. *Commentary on Plato's Meno*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Taylor, A.E. *Socrates*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1975.

Websites to Visit

1. http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/v/virtue.htm - The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. This link deals with Virtue theory as the view that the foundation of morality is the development of good character traits, or virtues.
2. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/ - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy page on "Virtue Ethics."

Lecture 4: Being Good and Being Pious: Plato's *Euthyphro*

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Plato's *Euthyphro*.

Introduction:

This lecture explores the relationship between ethics and religion. Plato's Socratic dialogue, the *Euthyphro*, sets out to challenge existing religious modes of thinking and replace these with logical reasoning. This was what ended up getting Socrates into such hot water. In effect what Socrates proposes in this dialogue is a new kind of religion, the religion of the pursuit of truth by reason.

The *Euthyphro*

Socrates, on his way to court where he will be tried, convicted and sentenced to death, comes across Euthyphro, a young man also on his way to court. Euthyphro, however, is on his way to testify against his own father who has killed a slave. Socrates finds this shocking, for in ancient times the word 'piety' meant respect for the family as much as respect for the gods. He asks Euthyphro how he could possibly be taking this impious stand against his father and Euthyphro replies that he is able to do it precisely because he is pious. Socrates then asks Euthyphro for a definition of 'piety' to which Euthyphro replies that piety is 'doing what the gods love, doing what the gods do.' Because there is a story in Greek religion about a god who prosecuted his father for murder, Euthyphro thinks he is pious because he is imitating this god. Socrates asks him if piety is imitating all gods or only some, for being pious to one could mean having to be impious to a second. Euthyphro changes his definition of piety: being pious must mean agreeing to do what *all* the gods agree to do. Socrates goes on then to ask the central question of the dialogue:

IS SOMETHING PIOUS OR GOOD BECAUSE THE GODS WILL IT OR DO THEY WILL IT BECAUSE IT IS GOOD?

Euthyphro, at first stumped by this question, replies that a thing is only good because the gods will it. This has come to be known by philosophers as "*The Divine Command Theory of Morality*." It is the theory of "God as boss," that is represented in history most strongly by such thinkers as John Calvin, Martin Luther and Soren Kierkegaard. Socrates argues that a thing isn't good because the gods command it, but rather the gods command it because it is good. Socrates implies that morality is higher than religion and therefore religions can be judged by moral standards. He implies that since we know morality by reason and religion by faith we should judge faith by reason rather than reason by faith.

All of this leads to a certain dilemma in which the question begs to be asked:

Which goes on top, then, religion or morality? Is God above goodness or is goodness above God? The traditional Jewish, Christian and Muslim answer to this is: neither. God and goodness are equally absolute, because goodness is God's
nature. In other words goodness
is godness.

In the final analysis, Socrates sees contradictions between Greek religion and reason. He creates philosophical thought that becomes, in essence, a new kind of religion to fill the hole of the dying Greek religion, which he sees as lacking in two fundamental qualities:

1. Rationality
2. Morality

Consider this . . .

How can one interpret the Abraham and Isaac story in Genesis 22? How can this apparent choice of religion over morality be interpreted from the viewpoint of the main line Jewish/Christian tradition? From a Divine Command Theory of Morality?

Thomas Aquinas: Religious Faith and Philosophical Reasoning

Saint Thomas Aquinas puts the relation between religious faith and philosophical reasoning very clearly. He says there are two kinds of truths:

1. Those we can discover by reason
2. Those we can know only if God reveals them supernaturally and we believe them

However, these two sets of truths can never contradict each other. Nothing we can discover by reason can ever contradict anything God has revealed to be believed as faith because the same God is the author of both: The truths known by *reason* and the truths known by *faith* are like two books from the same author.

Socrates, Dostoevski and the Role of Religion in Ethics.

Or Is It the Role of Ethics in Religion?

In an earlier lecture we pondered Dostoevski's assertion that: "*If God does not exist, everything is permissible*." It is helpful to investigate this statement from opposite philosophical viewpoints. In the most basic sense, it seems Socrates makes ethics independent of religion, while Dostoevski makes ethics dependent on religion.

Religious scholars agree that there are three visible dimensions to all religions:

CREED/CODE/CULT OR WORDS/WORKS/WORSHIP

And even though creeds and cults differ greatly, moral codes do not. Different religions share a common universal morality.

3 Levels of Morality

1. The lowest level is the morality of enlightened self-interest or calculated egotism. This is the morality that says: "I won't hit you if you don't hit me." It is a morality based on an agreement between human beings. However, if the agreement doesn't work, then neither does the morality. The consequence of failing at this morality is only public shame.
2. A higher level of morality is the morality of *justice*, the morality that says: Do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. The consequence of failing at this morality is personal guilt.
3. The highest level of morality is a morality beyond justice: the morality of mercy, charity, unselfishness, self-sacrifice, and even martyrdom.

Interestingly, every major world religion teaches this third level of morality. In fact, this third level of morality is specific to these religions and rarely seen outside of them.

All of this can be considered the subjective or psychological connection between morality and religion. In other words, "How we learned it." We learn "level 1 morality" by experience, "level 2 morality" by moral reason, and "level 3 morality" by religious faith. The objective or logical connection between morality and religion comes up when people are asked to justify their morality. Some turn immediately to religion. For instance when people ask the following types of questions:

"Why should all people be treated as valuable?"
"Why should people be loved rather than used?"

and they answer these questions with something like the following answer:

"Because we are all God's children."

What is implied in this answer is that religion is the reason and ground for one's ethics. Is religion, however, the *only* real reason or ground or justification for ethics? Dostoevski would say: "Yes, religion is the *only* ground for ethics. If there is no God, then everything is ethically permissible." But what would Socrates say? Socrates would probably answer that religion is *not* the only ground for ethics and that ethics can be grounded in a rational philosophy.

Consider this . . .

Would St. Thomas Aquinas agree with Socrates, Dostoevski or neither? (See page 27).

Adding Jean-Paul Sartre to the Debate

Dostoevski asserts that if there's no God then there is no real reason for being moral, Socrates is both religious (pious) and moral, but he does not ground his morality in his religion. It is interesting to compare Sartre, an atheist, to see a third view on this question. Sartre agrees with Dostoevski's assertion that, "If there is no God, everything is permissible," but unlike Dostoevski he believes that there is no God and therefore that everything *is* permissible. However this causes him enormous distress because it follows that human life itself is morally meaningless.

While Dostoevski and Sartre may disagree on whether or not God is alive or if morality even exists, they do actually agree on one thing: Religion and morality, or God and morality, both stand or fall together. Socrates, however, disagrees with this, he denies Dostoevski's statement.

And Now Camus . . .

In the 20th century Albert Camus seems to have taken a position similar to Socrates but in relation to a Christian God rather than the immoral gods of Socrates' Athens. Camus, not a Christian but an atheist or at least an agnostic, believes in morality, but without God. This leads to a dilemma, for Camus holds that (1) the true meaning of life is to be a saint, but (2) one can't be a saint without God, and (3) there is no God. This, of course, is a paradox, an apparent self-contradiction.

So, in the end we are left with four possibilities. We can believe:

1. That Dostoevski is right, but that there is no God (Sartre, Nietzsche).
2. That Dostoevski is right and there is a God (Judaism, Christianity, Islam).
3. That Dostoevski is wrong because there may or may not be a God but that there is morality anyway (Socrates, Camus).
4. That Dostoevski is wrong because God exists, but nevertheless, everything is permissible, that God makes no difference to morality.

Consider this . . .

Can you see how this final position on God and morality may fit into a modern Western culture? Are there contradictions inherent in this? Can we be dogmatically opposed to dogma and absolutely opposed to absolutes in morality?

The Moral Argument for God

If there is a real morality—if we are absolutely obligated to obey our moral conscience—then where does this absolute obligation come from? From a godless universe that is made up only of blind atoms? How can there be real good and evil? If conscience is not the voice of God and only the voice of society, or one's parents, then why do we believe that it is always wrong to disobey one's conscience? Is it possible to argue:

> If morality is absolutely binding on your conscience, then what explains this, if not God?

Summary

If we were to step back and look at all these arguments, it would seem that we started with Socrates' substitution of rational philosophy for religion but that we've come full circle and ended with an argument from rational philosophy FOR religion. While this may seem confusing, it is probably safe to assume that Socrates would approve of such confusion as evidence that you are thinking for yourself.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Plato, A.E. Taylor, H.N. Fowler (trans.). *Plato: Volume 1 (Euthyphro Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus)*. [18th printing]. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Other Books of Interest

Camus, Albert, Stuart Gilbert (trans.). *The Plague*. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1965.

Kierkegaard, Soren, Alastair Hannay (trans.). *Fear and Trembling*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1986.

Websites to Visit

1. http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/2d.htm - Direct link to Philosophy Pages information on the *Euthyphro*.

Lecture 5: Being Good and Being Happy: Plato's *Republic*

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Plato's *Republic*.

Introduction:

Plato was not only a philosopher but also a dramatic poet. He tried to *show* the truth rather than just tell it. He acted as the spokesperson for Socrates and it is through his Dialogues that we have come to know the thoughts of Socrates, who himself wrote nothing.

Nearly every philosophical position anyone has ever taken has its roots somewhere in Plato's Dialogues.

The *Republic*

Plato wrote 30 dialogues, the *Republic* being the most important. It is the single most influential book in the entire history of philosophy. Although ostensibly a dialogue on politics, it is most centrally about ethics first and politics second. Its central point is that justice is always more profitable than injustice, both for individuals and for states.

Justice and Plato

For Plato, justice was the most essential virtue. All other virtues are components of justice. It meant not just giving people their rights but more importantly, "right order" or "cosmic harmony." Plato considered the moral values for the individual and for the state as being the same pattern in two different places. It is important to notice the distinction between how politics was seen in ancient Greece as opposed to how it is seen in more modern times. For the Greeks, politics was inherently moral and idealistic. Politics was in fact social ethics.

Plato thought that there had to be a common pattern for the good individual and the good community because communities, after all, are made by individuals and of individuals.

The *Republic* contains ten books. Book One contains three different conversations about what justice is. Socrates converses with three people:

1. A conservative (Cephalus)
2. A moderate (Polymarchus)
3. A radical skeptic (Thrasymachus)

Through these conversations he searches for not just a definition but the true essence of what justice is, always and everywhere. He has the following conversations that correspond with the participants above:

1. *Definition #1:* Justice is paying your debts and telling the truth. Socrates challenges this definition by asking whether it would be just to return a weapon to its rightful owner if that owner were a homicidal maniac.
2. *Definition #2:* Justice is giving people what they deserve—helping friends and harming enemies. Socrates points out that sometimes we mistakenly take our enemies for friends and vice versa. The definition is then tightened to helping true friends and harming true enemies. Socrates suggests, however, that justice should do good even to enemies. This is because justice is a virtue and a virtue is good and good can only do good, not harm, to everyone that it touches.
3. *Definition #3:* Justice is whatever the strong man wants—might makes right. Justice is only a mask painted on the face of power. If justice is only a name for power, then it is naïve and foolish to try to be just. Wouldn't it make more sense to skip the justice mask and go straight to the power? For sometimes injustice is more profitable than justice. The end justifies the means and there is no moral absolute. Morality is not *real*. We make the rules and we can change them. We can cheat and sometimes cheating wins. It was weakness that made man create morality, and so in the strong man there is no need to be moral.

Most of the *Republic* is focused on trying to refute this claim about justice.

Consider this . . .

Why not do something evil if you can get away with it and end up with what you want?

Socrates Argues

After Thrasymachus leaves, the character of Glaucon takes up his position of moral relativism, in a position of Devil's Advo-cate, so that Socrates might argue more clearly against it and refute it better. Glaucon uses the image of "Gyges' Ring" which we see used again by Wagner and by Tolkien. The magic ring gives power to do whatever one wants and allows the bearer to get away with everything by turning him invisible. Socrates says that it is not wise to use the ring. Power corrupts and the ring needs to be destroyed. The fact remains, though, that the ring is alluring because it seems to bring happiness, so Socrates goes on to make another point:

It is true that everyone wants happiness, so what gives you happiness? What means attains the end of happiness? Is it:

1. Justice

   or

2. Injustice with the power to do whatever you want and get away with it?

GLAUCON

In the *Republic,* Plato uses his characters to pose three critical questions:

1. Why be consistently moral?
2. Why not be moral only when it pays to be moral?
3. Why not be immoral if you can get away with it?

Plato uses Glaucon to present egoist arguments to these questions. Glaucon recites the story of the "Ring of Gyges" to prove his point.

Gyges, a shepherd, discovered a body with a golden ring after an earthquake opened up the ground where his flock was feeding. Gyges took the ring and later as he toyed with it, he noticed that he became invisible when he turned the setting around. Using this power, he seduced the queen, conspired with her, and took control of the country after killing the king.

At this point, Glaucon asks Socrates to imagine two such magic rings, one owned by a just person, the other by an unjust person. Glaucon argues that no man could resist the temptation of taking what is not his. Therefore the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust. In reading the *Republic*, think about what Plato's response is to Glaucon.

If we didn't believe that doing wrong was going to make us happy we wouldn't do it. If sin didn't look like fun, wouldn't we all be saints? Plato's high aim in the *Republic* is to convince us that sin is never fun, that injustice is never profitable and that being good is the only way to be happy.

The Four Educational Steps to This Goal

These steps come in Plato's theory of education that appears in Books Six and Seven of the *Republic*. He uses here the image of a line divided into four parts and illustrates the four steps with the image of the prisoner escaping the cave of ignorance. The steps:

1. Tradition and authority. Accepting conventional opinions and others' ideas without ever seeing things for yourself. You know only images of reality, not reality itself.
2. Seeing things for yourself through personal experience and using your own senses.
3. Logical reasoning. Proving it, not just seeing it.
4. Wisdom, or understanding the natures or essences of what you see and prove.

The *Republic* goes through the first three steps in Book One, but the goal of the remainder of the *Republic* is to tackle the fourth step.

Plato's Strategy

Plato must prove that justice is always more profitable than injustice and must be able to reach certainty about this in order to convince the reader. Plato says that in order to do this one must discover the true nature, or essence of justice and injustice. He begins this investigation by remarking that justice and injustice exist in two basic places:

1. in individual souls

   and

2. in the State.

Though ultimately Plato is searching for answers to the essential nature of justice in the soul, it is easier to begin by investigating the patterns of justice that one can see more clearly in the State.

Justice and the State

Plato believes that the State is natural and not artificial, and that it naturally arises from *specialization*. Different people are good at different things. This efficiency in specialization leads to wealth, which leads to the advent of a class of people needed to control the distribution and safety of this wealth. Three classes of people naturally evolve from this process and correspond to three natural functions of any society. In addition, each possess a virtue which is necessary for them to do their jobs well.

CLASS	*FUNCTION*	*VIRTUE*
1. The Producers of Wealth	law abiders	moderation
2. Supervisors/Keepers of Order	law enforcers	courage
3. Rulers/Legislators	law makers	wisdom

Justice comes with the harmonious functioning of all three of these classes/functions/virtues. Justice is to a community as health is to a body. Therefore a just society has moderation, courage and wisdom. And because every developed society has these three groups within them, with these three functions, there must be something perennial here that can be seen to be present in every individual soul.

A Map of the Soul

This 'map of the state' can be applied to the individual and become a 'map of the soul,' and by doing this Plato creates, in effect, the world's first psychology. He begins by studying the differences between desire and reason and the force that controls the choice between these two elements. He finds that the soul, just like the state, has three powers:

SOUL		**STATE**	
Desire	} JUSTICE	Moderation	} JUSTICE
Will		Courage	
Reason		Wisdom	

Consider this . . .

How might the four cardinal virtues correspond to the ideas of Freud?

Who Should Rule the Just State?

Plato posits the idea of the "Philosopher King," that the just state would be ruled by truly wise philosophers.

"Until philosophers become kings, or kings become philosophers, we will have no rest from troubles in the world."—Plato

A philosopher, he says, can rise to the fourth level of education and know the essences of things like justice and injustice. For Plato, this abstract philosophical wisdom is the key to practical ethical goodness. In order to choose between virtue and vice you must know the essence of both and the final payoff of philosophy is the knowledge of these essences.

Education and Music in the *Republic*

Plato says that the single most important thing in the state is education. He invented university education as we know it today and, with his "Academy," the world's first university. He goes on to say that the first and most powerful kind of education is music. Music is so powerful because it is the first thing, even before you understand language and reason, to put order or disorder into your soul. It connects you with the patterns of harmony in the cosmos, and since justice is a form of harmony, music is powerful training for developing morality.

Above Justice?—Goodness

Greater than even justice is "The Good." This is Plato's absolute. You cannot define goodness, as you can define justice, because it is infinite, like absolute perfection. The good is like the sun; you can't stare at the sun, but it is only by the sun's light that you know everything else. The absolute good is not intelligible but it is the origin of all intelligibility.

To Read: Read the end of Book Six and the beginning of Book Seven on the three parables or pictures: the Sun, the Line divided into four parts, and the Cave.

Definitions of Injustice Within the State and the Soul

There are five forms of government, according to Plato: one just and four unjust:

Just State	Aristocracy—rule by the best (*aristos*)
Unjust States	1. Timocracy—rule by soldiers
	2. Oligarchy—rule by a rich few
	3. Democracy—rule by the masses: anarchy
	4. Tyranny—dictatorship

The natural order is perverted in the four regimes below aristocracy. There is a correspondence to four unjust regimes within the soul:

Just Soul	Rule by Wisdom
Unjust Soul	1. Rule by the Will
	2. Rule by the necessary desires
	3. Rull by all the Desires
	4. Rule by obsession and addiction to power

The soul of an unjust man is like a zoo where the animals rule the zoo-keeper. Thus Plato shows that justice must always be more profitable than injustice.

Consider this . . .

Why aren't we all saints for having read Plato if we agree with his conclusion that moral virtue (justice) is always profitable (makes us happy)?

Is there something wrong with Plato's argument?

Can we know that justice would make us happy but nevertheless choose injustice instead?

Is it possible that we get virtue not by teaching but by practice?

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Plato, Allan Bloom (trans.). *Republic of Plato* (2nd Edition). New York: Basic Books, 1991.

Other Books of Interest

Wallach, John R. *Platonic Political Art: A Study of Critical Reason and Democracy*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001.

Websites to Visit

1. http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Anci/AnciBhan.htm - Plato's Concept of Justice: An Analysis by D.R. Bhandari of J.N.V. University.
2. http://www.uqtr.uquebec.ca/AE/Vol_7/Aes&justice/2-Byrne.html - An essay entitled "Plato, Justice, and the Beautiful Soul" by Christopher Byrne.
3. http://pages.infinit.net/ggour/apop/crim-del.htm - A little off-beat, but informative site with an essay entitled "Plato, Woody Allen, and Justice" by Gary Colwell of Concordia College, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Lecture 6: Aristotle's Ethics

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Aristotle

Aristotle is probably the most popular philosopher in the world, yet one of the least read. His books are not as dramatically entertaining as those of Plato, but the content of his work is deeply engaging primarily because it is so commonsensical. Aristotle studied for half of his life under the tutelage of Plato, and the similarities are strong, but it is more enlightening to look at their differences.

Differences Between Plato and Aristotle

Metaphysics: Plato and Aristotle agreed that reality was full of order, structure, species, natures, forms, or essences; the philosopher needed to know and define them. However, Plato believed that these essences existed in a separate dimension from everything else because they were changeless and everything else was changing. Aristotle, on the other hand, said that they were just the essences of changing things.

Anthropology: Plato sharply separated the body from the soul, while Aristotle said the soul is the "form of the body," and the body is the "matter of the soul."

Epistemology: Plato separated reason (the soul's tool for knowing), from sense experience (the body's tool for knowing). He believed that we all have an innate knowledge of the Platonic Ideals in our minds always, and philosophizing is the process of pulling up these ideas by recollection. Aristotle, however, felt that all knowledge begins with sense experience, and that we abstract these essences from our sense experience of concrete things because that is where they exist—in concrete things.

Conclusions from These Differences

In method, Plato is always looking for a perfect abstract definition, while Aristotle is looking more to concrete "real" life. In content, Plato taught that the good life was simply the virtuous life and that bodily goods don't matter, whereas Aristotle believed they did.

Consider this . . .

Would Aristotle agree or disagree with Plato's statement that no evil could happen to a good man? Why?

The *Nicomachean Ethics*

The central question of the book is: What is the Good? In the end, the goal of the book is to investigate and answer as much as possible the question: What is the purpose of life?

Book One

Book One begins by defining the word "good." It does this by looking at how people use the word, by what things they call "good," and what is common to all of them.

The good is always what we desire, the aim of all activity, whether moral or not, and whether it is really good or just apparently good.

Consider this . . .

Explain: Desire is to good as belief is to truth.

The Structure of Desire

There are some things that we desire only for the sake of other things: money, medicine, etc. Then there are some things we desire for their own sake: pleasure, beauty, truth. This is the distinction between means and ends.

There must be something worth desiring for its own sake in order to motivate

"If we choose everything for the sake of something else, that process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and in vain." —Aristotle

us to desire all the 'means' that lead to that end. What is that end? This, in fact, is what is being asked when we ask, "What is the meaning of life?" For Aristotle, then, this question is a very practical one. As he states:

> *"Will not the knowledge of it have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, hit upon what is right?"*

Like Socrates, Aristotle believes there is a universal, objectively real good, but that it is not clear and easy to find. He says:

> *"It is the mark of an educated man to look for as much clarity in each kind of things as the nature of the subject permits."*

Aristotle sees ethics as neither something akin to mathematics (which is very certain and clear) nor something like rhetoric (which is not certain or clear at all). He finds ethics to be somewhere between the two.

What Is Happiness?

Modern people think of happiness as something that 'happens' to them like good luck. Happiness, in this sense, has nothing to do with how good we are, it happens by chance and is temporary. For Aristotle, happiness is:

1. Dependent on how good you are.
2. It happens by choice, not chance.
3. It is lasting and not temporary.

Happiness is not just contentment because you can't be truly happy unless you are wise, and you can't be wise unless you suffer.

Consider this . . .

Would it be Aristotelian to say, "You think you're happy, but you're not?" Why or why not?

It may be easier for a modern mind to use the word 'blessedness' as being closer to the Greek concept of happiness. Happiness in the Aristotelian sense is assumed to be essentially the same for everyone because it is the fulfillment of our deepest desires, which in turn come from our essential nature, which is the same for everyone. (If not, we are not one species, but many.)

The next question is: What is happiness, or blessedness? Aristotle begins by considering three candidates for happiness: Pleasure, Honor, and Contemplation.

Pleasure: All men want it, but it can't be the highest good for man because it is not distinctly human since it is common to both man and animal.

Honor: Many people seek honor, but it cannot be the ultimate good because the person who seeks honor is dependent on those who bestow the honor rather than on himself. Also, people pursue honor not for its own sake but to be assured of their merit.

Contemplation: This is a higher happiness, but few people seek this level of wisdom.

Every occupation of man has an end, a purpose, a function, as does every organ in the body. How then can there not be an ultimate 'end' to man as a whole? Can we not say then that being good, being happy and being fully human are three ways of saying the same thing? Reason (in the broad, ancient sense) makes us distinctively human. Living according to reason is the human good, which includes moral and intellectual virtues.

Consider this . . .

If the happiness of contemplation/wisdom is so profound, why do so few people ever achieve it?

Does Luck Play a Part?

You can't control bad luck (or good), and if luck plays a part in happiness then you can't be sure that your life won't be miserable no matter how good you are. Socrates himself had some very bad luck and we can assume that he was very good. How true is the statement: "If activities—are what deter-

mines the character of life, then no blessed man can ever become miserable, because he will never do the acts that are hateful and mean?"

Aristotle resolved the question of whether good fortune was part of human happiness or not by a compromise between answering yes and answering no:

> *"Small pieces of bad or good fortune clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or the other, but a multitude of great events if they turn out well will make a life more blessed, while if they turn out ill they will crush and maim blessedness."*

Consider this . . .

What would Job, or King Priam of Troy, or Oedipus have to say about the statement above?

What can you make of the fact that poor nations have much lower suicide rates than richer nations?

Aristotle then goes on to define virtue as the most important means to the end of happiness. He finds a common pattern in all the virtues.

The Principle of the Golden Mean Between Two Extremes

Virtues are chosen, Aristotle says, by the reason and the will that imposes the right form on the matter of material actions and desires. This form avoids the two extremes of excess and deficit, too much or too little of the material action or passion. He says we must steer down the middle of the road and avoid the ditches on either side. For every virtue there are two opposite vices. For instance: Courage is the mean between too much fear (cowardice) and too little fear (recklessness). Temperance is the mean between being too sensitive or too insensitive to pleasure and pain. "Proper Pride" is the mean between vanity and false humility.

However, is EVERY virtue a mean between two extremes? Thomas Aquinas said no, there are three virtues that are not: Faith, Hope, and Love.

Aristotle and Friendship

Aristotle mentions a form of love that he takes very seriously—Friendship. He says that friendship transcends justice and that it is the highest form of love.

He delineates friendship into three types:

Friendship of mutual pleasure

Friendship of utility

Friendship of respect.

He derives these three kinds of friendship from the three kinds of good:

The good that gives us pleasure

The good that is useful

The good that is moral

Here is a very practical application of Aristotle's reasoning. There are only three good reasons for doing or loving something: Either it is morally good, or it is a practical necessity, or it gives you some kind of joy. If something is not one of these things, Aristotle argues, why bother with it? A practical way to simplify your life!

NOTES

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Aristotle, J.L. Ackrill, W.D. Ross, J.O. Urmson, David Ross (trans.). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Bodeus, Richard and Jan Garrett (trans.). *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics* (SUNY Series, Ancient Greek Philosophy). Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Morris, Thomas V. *If Aristotle Ran General Motors*. New York: Henry Holt & Co. Inc., 1998.

Telford, Kenneth. *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Binghamton, New York: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, 1999.

Websites to Visit

1. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/ - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. A fairly comprehensive look at Aristotle's Ethics including comparisons to Plato's earlier work.
2. http://members.tripod.com/~batesca/arieth.html - A long list of some interesting Internet sites that address Aristotle's Political Philosophy from a website by Clifford A. Bates, Jr.
3. http://www.amazoncastle.com/feminism/aristo.shtml - "Aristotle: On a Good Wife," from *Oikonomikos*. An interesting point of view about Aristotle's essay.

Lecture 7: Being Good and Being Successful: Aquinas on What Is the Meaning of Life?

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Peter Kreeft's *Summa of the Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of St. Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica Edited and Explained for Beginners*.

Introduction:

Why should we be good people and lead a good life? Is there a value and a purpose to human life? If there is, then what do we mean exactly by the word 'success?' If success in life means attaining life's end, then we have made the assumption that life does have an end and a meaning. There is a radical difference with respect to this question between typically ancient thinkers and typically modern ones. The ancients, for the most part, assumed that life had a goal or ultimate good to it, while modern philosophers are much more unsure of this assumption.

Thomas Aquinas and How Philosophy Can Help Distinguish True and False Values

In order to even begin to answer the above question, it is important to first ask another question: Why is the question "What is the meaning of life?" an important question?

The most universal form of all human art is storytelling. This is because we know stories are like life, and if stories are like life then life is like a story. What kind of story, then, are we in? Is our story meaningful, or is it just 'sound and fury, signifying nothing'? If there is no real meaning or point or purpose to life, then it doesn't really matter who we are or what we do.

We can think of life as a story and the three dimensions of ethics as the three dimensions of the story:

SOCIAL ETHICS is about the PLOT.

INDIVIDUAL ETHICS is about the CHARACTERS.

The SUMMUM BONUM (Greatest Good/Purpose) is about the THEME.

If a story has no theme, then the characters cannot be heroes or villains. A life with no purpose cannot have villains or heroes either.

The hardest story to write today is the serious heroic epic. And the hardest life to lead today is the purposeful heroic one.

Consider this . . .

Is that why The *Lord of the Rings* was voted "the greatest book of the century" by four different polls of readers?

Do we, in modern society, believe in heroes and villains anymore?

Does the kind of "story" we live in today allow for them?

C.S. Lewis and "First and Second Things."

In his essay "First and Second Things," C.S. Lewis wrote that if we rank the good things in life and put the first things first and the second things second, we can hope to achieve both. BUT if we put second things first and first things second, we will most likely not only miss out on the first things, but also on the second ones as well. For example:

Alcoholism perverts the proper pleasure of alcohol, which is there in the first place to gladden our hearts, so the alcoholic not only has a miserable heart rather than a glad one (a "first thing"), but he also can no longer enjoy the proper pleasure of alcohol (a "second thing").

Consider this . . .

How can loving animals more than people be judged by this principle?

Lewis goes on to say that our society puts survival first. But if we don't truly know why we should survive, it follows that we can't be expected to survive for very long. Hypochondriacs endanger their health by idolizing it.

To come back then and consider the question of "What is the meaning of life?", we realize that at the very least it is the most practical question we could ever ask. Without an answer to this first question of the "summum bonum" it is unlikely that we will attain lesser goods, for these lesser goods are all "second things" and are relative to the "first thing."

Means and Ends

Everything we think worth doing is either a means or an end, and some ends, when looked at closely, are also means to further ends. For instance, money is a means to food, which is a means to health. Or, a rifle sight is a means to using the rifle, which is a means to fighting a battle, which is a means to winning the battle, which is a means to winning a war, which is a means to having peace, which is a means to . . . ?

Consider this . . .

What is the end of everything else?
If there is no end, then there is no reason to do anything. If peace is not worth having then war is not worth waging and battle is not worth fighting. Ancient thinkers would have labeled this idea of no purpose as moral insanity. It is Macbeth's philosophy (but not Shakespeare's).

> *Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player*
> *That struts and frets his hour upon the stage*
> *And then is heard no more. It is a tale*
> *Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,*
> *Signifying nothing.*—Macbeth, *Act V, Scene V*

The will to live requires a reason to live. It follows that if you have a reason to live then you also have a reason to suffer. If life has a meaning, then suffering has a meaning simply because it is part of life.

Why does it seem that the modern world is so much more afraid of suffering than the ancients were?

Have we lost much of our courage, or have modern thinkers lost the conviction that suffering is meaningful?

"A man can endure any 'how' if only he has a 'why.'" —Nietzsche

Philosophy and Suicide

The less wealth one has the less likely they are to commit suicide. If you are poor, then you have a meaning to your life—to escape poverty. If you're already at the top of the ladder, then what is your life's meaning? Of course you can find meaning there, but it is more difficult.

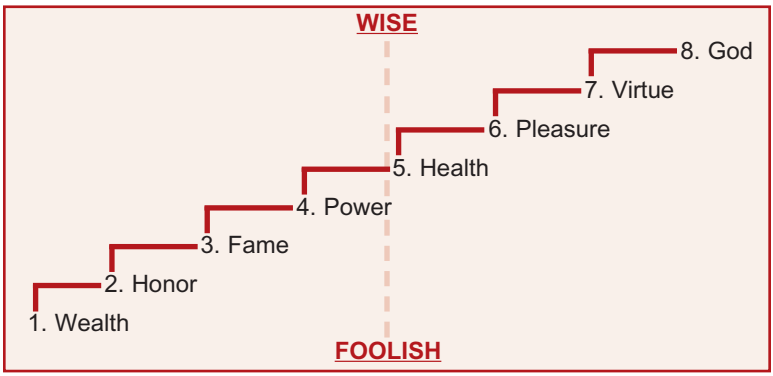
Highest Suicide Rates	Lowest Suicide Rates
Russia	Bangladesh
Holland	Chad
Sweden	Haiti
United States	Australian Aborigines
Hungary	

Every great philosopher in history has dealt with the question of the "meaning of life," and every great storyteller too. The single most clear and condensed critical summary of the most common answers to that question that I know appears in question two of the third part of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae.*

Aquinas' Eight Answers

Aquinas' methodology was to look at both sides of every question before deciding which side had proved its point. Each unit of his *Summa* is called an "article" and is a single question with a "yes" or "no" answer, like a miniature debate.

The eight Articles or Candidates for the *Summum Bonum* (from the most foolish to wise):



Wealth: The most popular but the most inadequate. Why does happiness seem to consist in wealth?

"All Things Obey Money." This may be true, but if it is, it is because fools obey money. Just because it's the first thing that comes to mind does not mean it is the best answer.

Money is like an umbrella spread over everything. It can be exchanged for many goods and services. But that is its limit. It can only buy things money can buy. It can't buy peace or wisdom or neighborliness, etc. "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world but loses his own self?"

The desire for money is unlimited. There are two kinds of wealth—artificial and natural. Artificial wealth is the money itself. Natural wealth is the real things money can buy. We can only enjoy a finite amount of material goods and therefore our desire for the things money can buy is limited. But the desire for artificial wealth is unlimited, even though it is only a means to an end of buying natural wealth.

Money is "a means of exchange." It is a means and not an end, and therefore not the "last end," or *summum bonum*.

Honor: Happiness seems to consist in honor because it is a reward for virtue. Honor, however, is only a sign that you have something honorable. A sign signifies something else but you're a fool if you seek the sign and not what it signifies.

"A finger is useful for pointing to the moon, but woe to him who mistakes the finger for the moon." —Zen saying

People will suffer the loss of almost anything but their honor. But Aquinas observes that people seek to be honored for a further reason. People want to be honored for having some virtue.

Happiness can't consist in honor because happiness is in the person who is happy—it's internal. But honor comes from the person giving the honor and so is external.

Glory: Glory or fame seems to be the reward for being great, which, in turn, gives you a sort of immortality. Aquinas argues, however, that glory can be false and given by fools so it can't be the true good. In addition, the glory you have after you die is in others' minds, not your own, so it can't make *you* happy. And even the most famous person will eventually be forgotten. Finally, human knowledge can only *reflect* reality, unlike God's knowledge, which *creates*, so human glory, which comes from human knowledge, cannot possibly create happiness.

Power: Happiness may seem to consist in power because this is the way that we tend to think of God. We think of him first as "all-mighty." If happiness is being like God and God is power, then we want power first of all. Aquinas, though, argues that God's power is nothing but his goodness. All of his attributes are one with his essence and thus one with each other. This means that God cannot use his power for evil. Man, however, can.

Happiness may also seem to consist in power because we fear losing power more than almost anything else. We will even endure suffering as long as it's freely chosen (within our own power). But, answers Aquinas, why do we hate powerlessness and servitude? He answers, because it hinders our good use of power, not because power is the supreme end. Power, like wealth, is a means to an end.

Consider this . . .

Is freedom one form of power? If so, is it then good as a means but not as an end?

"The master is really the slave because he is enslaved to his need for his slave, while the slave is really free because he is free of his need for the master."—Hegel

Consider this . . .

Can you see how the above statement might relate to technology?
Suppose we substitute "machines" for "slave?"
Are we happier the more technologically advanced we become?

Why the First Four Candidates Don't Constitute True Happiness

They are all compatible with evil.

Their satisfaction is only partial.

They all can have harmful results.

They are external, not internal.

To continue: Aquinas considers four more candidates.

Health: "If you have your health you have everything."

Aquinas says that this is only relatively true. It is true that bodily health is greater than anything external, but it's less than the good of the soul. Like the words in a book, the body is also just the matter, not the meaning.

Bodily good cannot be happiness because man is surpassed in bodily good by many animals (for instance, the longevity of the turtle, the strength of the lion, etc.), but his happiness can surpass that of any animal.

Pleasure: Pleasure seems to be an answer to what happiness is because both pleasure and happiness are sought for their own sake, as ends and not means. It is also true that whenever we have happiness, we are pleased. So pleasure can be considered an attribute of happiness, though Aquinas argues that pleasure is more precisely a *consequence* of happiness. He says: "Our desires rest in our real good." The reason we are pleased is because we possess something good. Pleasure, then, doesn't yet tell us what happiness essentially consists in.

Pleasure and happiness aren't the same because we often regret pleasures, but never happiness. If there is such a thing as harmful pleasures, then pleasure cannot be the same as our true good.

Wisdom/Virtue: By this point we must deduce that happiness is internal, not external, so happiness must consist in the good of the soul. The good of the soul is wisdom (the good of the mind) and virtue (the good of the will). But, argues Aquinas, the soul itself cannot be its own last end, because it grows and attains maturity, if successful, and fails to attain it, if unsuccessful. It is like an arrow shot to a target. We still have not found what the target is. It's true that it's by the soul that happiness is attained, but what is that happiness? To say that it is the soul itself is like saying that the bull's eye is the arrow—that the arrow is its own target.

"Thou has made us for thyself and (therefore) our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." —Augustine

God: Aquinas observes that no one in this world is perfectly happy. This means that either there is something more than this world, or there is no such thing as perfect happiness anywhere. However, we have a natural desire for perfect happiness, and if nature makes nothing in vain, then this desire for happiness must correspond to something that actually exists. Since nothing in this world can fill that void, there must be something more. The goods, then, of this world and of ourselves are all limited, but our desire is unlimited, therefore there must be an unlimited good which alone can satisfy all our desires. This is Aquinas' argument for the human good being nothing less than GOD.

Consider this . . .

What are the similarities and differences between Aquinas' five arguments from the *Cosmos* for the existence of God as the First Cause and this argument from *Desire* for God as Final End?

NOTES

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter. *Summa of the Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of St. Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica Edited and Explained for Beginners*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1997.

Other Books of Interest

Kreeft, Peter. *C.S. Lewis for the Third Millennium*. Ft. Collins, Colorado: Ignatius Press, 1997.

Lewis, C.S., Clyde Kilby (ed.). *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C.S. Lewis*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace and Company, 2003.

Websites to Visit

1. http://www.newadvent.org/summa/ - A site containing the entire text of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*.
2. http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/staamp0.htm - University of Notre Dame site with detailed information on St. Thomas Aquinas and other philosophers.
3, http://www.britannia.com/bios/cslewis.html - A short biography of C.S. Lewis with links to other C.S. Lewis websites.

Lecture 8: Being Good and Being Successful According to Machiavelli: Is It Either/Or?

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* on Ethics and Politics

While Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas saw a connection between being good and being successful in life, Machiavelli sees a contradiction between the two. In the whole history of human thought no thinker as influential as Machiavelli has been so despised. So despised, in fact, that even his followers and successors in some way or other try to mitigate his bold claims. In his most simplistic form Machiavelli is a pragmatist, immoral or amoral, who emphasizes success and power over any thought of moral good.

"Politics is the art of the possible." —Machiavelli

The Prince

Everything that Machiavelli says in this book follows from three assumptions:

The metaphysical assumption: Reality does not include ideals, goods, or values. Values are not objectively real. Reality consists only of material facts. Machiavelli, in essence, is a materialist.

The anthropological assumption: Man by nature is wicked, selfish, competitive and immoral. This follows from his metaphysical materialism. Matter is essentially competitive, and so then is man. So morality contradicts reality.

The epistemological assumption: Only sense observation reveals reality. Human history is an empirical science. There can be a scientific formula for success in life because there are only two variables:

VIRTU—not moral virtue but strength, power, prowess—the ability to impose one's will on someone or something else

FORTUNA—Luck, chance or fate

The Formula for Success: The maximization of VIRTU and the minimization of FORTUNA or the conquest of *fortuna* by *virtu.* In the end, all of Machiavelli's advice comes down to how to move something from the *fortuna* category to the *virtu* category.

Reducing everything to these two categories is implicitly the metaphysics of atheism. Whatever is not under man's knowledge and control is mere Fortune, or Chance. But there is no place for Chance in a universe designed and created by an all-knowing God.

Consider this . . .

What are the similarities and differences between Machiavelli's attempt to conquer chance and "the conquest of nature" by science and technology?

The Basic Assumptions in Depth

There is a radical separation between the real and the ideal. Machiavelli writes that the classical ideals were like the stars, beautiful but impractical, too high and far away to cast light on our low earthly paths. He says:

"Many have written of imaginary republics that never existed. But I write of things as they are in fact, not of things as we would wish them to be."

If you want to attain your goals, make them practical. Since you cannot bring the real up to the ideal, lower the ideal to the real. The purpose of *The Prince* is not to teach ideals but to simply find out what has succeeded the best in history. Machiavelli observes what has happened to those who have had high and absolute moral principles, and comes to the conclusion that they have usually become martyrs. He writes:

"Unarmed prophets have failed, armed prophets have succeeded."

The Prince is the first example of history written as a value-free science. Machiavelli says the goal of society is success, not virtue. Before Machiavelli it was assumed that real events and persons were to be judged by ideals. Machiavelli reverses this and says ideals are to be judged by how realistic and practical they are. To know this, he says, one need only be a historian and not a philosopher, moralist or saint. Science then is the standard for ethics, and empirical facts are the only justification for moral ideals.

History = Data Ethical Ideals = Theory

Judge the Theory by the Data

Chapter 15: The Things for Which Men and Especially Princes Are Praised or Blamed

Is Machiavelli, in ranking bodily self-preservation above virtue, assuming the soul counts less than the body?

"If a Prince wants to maintain his rule,
he must learn how not to be virtuous."

Machiavelli is then claiming to teach you how not to be virtuous? Does this assume you already know how to be virtuous?

Consider this . . .

Is this entirely contrary to what Plato thought? Read carefully the parable of the cave in *Republic,* Book Seven.

Chapter 18: How Princes Should Honor Their Word

Machiavelli answers this question very simply by saying that Princes should only honor their word when it works to their advantage.

> *". . . a prudent ruler cannot and should not honor his word when it places him at a disadvantage."*

The two assumptions behind this are that survival is the greatest good and that honest men do not survive. If all men were good, he argues, perhaps the ideals would be workable but "because men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them." What the above implies is that your morality is dependant on other people's morality and thus that other people set the standards. Is this controlling *Fortuna* by *Virtu?*

Previous moralists had always assumed that there was a strong moral force

Consider this . . .

Take the example of Jesus (the moralist) and Pontius Pilate (the Machiavellian). Which one survived? Which one had more influence on history? Which one was successful?

in human nature. Machiavelli denies that this exists.

If man were by nature 'good,' he says, then the pangs of conscience would be the pains he fears the most, but in fact man fears physical pain much more. Therefore:

> *"It is unreasonable to expect that an armed man should obey one who is unarmed"*

Consider this . . .

Suppose you had a son whom you loved very much who was captured and forced by the Nazis to choose between helping Dr. Mengele perform experiments to torture his friends or being tortured himself. Which of these options would be more terrible to you?

Do you believe that it is more terrible to do evil or to suffer it? Is it more harmful to take evil into your soul or into your body?

Machiavelli and War

> *"There is no avoiding war. It can only be postponed to the advantage of others . . .The art of war is all that is expected of a ruler . . . It is necessary for the Prince to think of only one thing continuously—military strategy."*

Machiavelli argues that laws are worthless without sanctions and that since there is little or no sanction of inner conscience, it is necessary that soldiers multiply to compensate for the lack of 'inner soldiers.' This anthropology

assumes that no one can be trusted and this lack of trust must be filled by force. Competition, not cooperation, is the law of nature.

It Is Better to Be Feared Than to Be Loved

The conclusion that it is better to be feared than to be loved follows logically from the above assumptions.

> *". . . Since men love as they please but fear as the Prince pleases, a wise Prince should rely on what he controls and not on what he cannot control."*

Consider this . . .

How efficient is this way of thinking?

Is it micro-managing?

Relying on *virtu* and not *fortuna* may seem reasonable to many, but the superiority of fear to love seems unreasonable to almost everyone. But the two go together; the premise necessarily leads to the conclusion. One's worldview (metaphysics) and lifeview (reality) always go together. Machiavelli shows us here the necessary connection between a philosopher's ethical conclusions and his metaphysical and anthropological assumptions.

Appearance and Reality

Plato says that wisdom involves distinguishing between appearance and reality and choosing reality. Machiavelli says the opposite—that, for a Prince, appearance is more important than reality; that "image is everything." "Everyone sees who you appear to be but only a few see who you really are." Therefore, says Machiavelli, what you appear to be is more important than who you really are.

Foresight

> *"When trouble is sensed far in advance it can easily be remedied, but if you wait for it to show itself, any medicine will be too late because the disease will have become incurable."*

Consider this . . .

Is this implicitly contradictory to Machiavelli's previous advice? Is 'foresight' moral wisdom or not?

Can the Machiavellian Formula Be Successful?

Since all of Machiavelli's assertions claim to be practical, the question of whether or not his formula actually works is of the utmost importance in judging him.

Since “policy” means ‘virtu’ and “the times” means ‘fortuna,’ this means that the only way *virtu* can conquer *fortuna* is by conforming to it, and obeying it. It’s the old master-slave relationship. In order to master fortune you must be its lackey. To be a success you must be a conformist to the times, to others’ opinions. You have to be able to bend. You can take this further then and conclude that the conquering Prince is really, in fact, a coward. And cowards usually appear as bullies. Thus Machiavelli concludes with this image:

> *“Fortune is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her.”*

The image for success in Machiavelli’s terms is that of rape. In other words, rape “Lady Luck” and assert your “manliness.”

Conclusions:

Perhaps Machiavelli is so useful to us as thinkers because he forces us to do that very thing and think very hard about what he says. He is challenging and often offensive. He makes you angry and therefore you have to respond. You need to find new reasons for old convictions when they are challenged so radically.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Machiavelli, Niccolo, Wayne A. Rebhorn (trans.). *The Prince and Other Writings* (Barnes & Noble Classics Series). New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

Kreeft, Peter. *Socrates Meets Machiavelli: The Father of Philosophy Cross-Examines the Author of the Prince*. Ft. Collins, Colorado: Ignatius Press, 2003.

Viroli, Maurizio, Antony Shugaar (trans.). *Niccolo's Smile: A Biography of Machiavelli*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

Websites to Visit

1. http://www.lucidcafe.com/library/96may/machiavelli.html - A short biography of Machiavelli with related links.
2. http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/m/machiave.htm - Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy page on Machiavelli.
3. http://www.the-prince-by-machiavelli.com/ - A site dedicated to Machiavelli's *Prince* by Alwyn Botha.

Lecture 9: Being Good and Being Evil: Is Humanity Naturally Good? (Hobbes vs. Rousseau)

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

Hobbes vs. Rousseau on Pessimism Versus Optimism

To explore whether man is innately good or evil, it is important to look at two contrasting philosophers who came after Machiavelli: Hobbes and Rousseau.

Hobbes seems to be the pessimist. He believes that man by nature is selfish and bad and that it is society that makes him good. He says that man invented civil society in order to force himself to be good. This is why one needs a rather totalitarian society, which he called The Leviathan (Great Beast).

Rousseau seems to be the optimist. He believes that man by nature is essentially good and that society makes him bad. He believes man is a "noble savage" but has been taught to act badly, contrary to his nature, by society.

Natural Law Theory Out/Social Contract Theory In

Both Hobbes and Rousseau, however, share a common modern assumption: that society is not natural but artificial. They both contrast "the state of nature" and "the state of civil society." They believe that society began at a certain time in early human history when a social contract was made. Social morality is an artifice or contract.

Consider this . . .

What was Plato's view on this subject?

Optimism vs. Pessimism

Ethics is about good and evil, so whether you are an optimist or a pessimist about human nature in your anthropology will make a great difference in your ethics. For instance, it will make a difference to the question of how much government there should be. The optimist will tend to say, "that government governs best, that governs least;" that man is good and should be left alone. The pessimist, however, will say you need more government, even force, because on his own man is brutish and selfish. The optimist would favor less order and structure in a society. He would tend towards libertarianism, while the pessimist would ask for more order and structure to tame the beast within us.

Consider this . . .

How would a pessimist approach child rearing and education?

An optimist?

Good and Evil Defined

There are two different kinds of goodness:

Ontological goodness, which is the goodness in your being or nature, apart from your will and choices/deeds/lifestyle.

Moral goodness, which is your virtues, or your virtuous acts/deeds/choices.

These two kinds of goodness correspond to two kinds of evil also:

Ontological evil, which is worthlessness, misery, suffering or death.

Moral evil is wickedness and sin.

Moral evil is what we do. Ontological evil is what we suffer. "It" happens.

Consider this . . .

What can you say about Hitler's ontological goodness? Did he have any?

Since there are two kinds of goodness, and two possible answers to the question of whether man is good or evil, there are four possible anthropologies to investigate:

1. *The Traditional/Classical View:* This view says that man is ontologically very good—great, in fact. He was created in the image of God and he has intrinsic rights, dignity and worth. However, he is also a sinner and can act contrary to his nature. This means that in this view there is much moralizing and preaching, and need for repentance and reformation. Man's moral badness is not tolerated because of his ontological goodness.

"We think too much of ourselves and too little of our souls."—G.K. Chesterton

2. *Hobbes' View:* Hobbes, like Machiavelli, denies that we are ontologically good *or* morally good. Morally, man is selfish and competitive. Ontologically, we are just clever animals. Hobbes is a materialist: everything real is made of matter. Thought is just refined sensation, and love is just refined animal lust. Matter is competitive, since no two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time. If there are two people and only enough food for one, one must die. Material goods can be shared only by being divided, so that the more that I give to you, the less I have for myself. So a materialist's metaphysics necessitates an anthropology of selfishness.
3. *Rousseau's View:* Rousseau says that man is ontologically good *and* morally good; that he is a kind of god, and that there is no such thing as sin. The only evil is belief in evil.
4. *Sartre's View:* Sartre's view is that man is ontologically bad but morally good; that there is no such thing as intrinsic human dignity/worth/value,

and that there is no such thing as sin or vice or moral evil. Life is meaningless and absurd with no God and thus no purpose or value. We create our own laws and values, so a thing becomes good simply by choosing it. Morality is entirely subjective.

How Would the Optimist and the Pessimist Address Plato's Question in the *Meno*:

"Can Virtue Be Taught?"

Four Options:

- Pessimism says that virtue comes only against our nature because our nature is evil. (Hobbes, Machiavelli) It's not taught but conditioned by fear and force, physical or legal.
- Optimism says we have it by nature. (Rousseau) Virtue doesn't need to be taught; it's innate.
- Another, lesser kind of optimism says virtue comes by teaching—enlighten the mind and virtue will follow. (Plato)
- The middle view (Aristotle's) says that both virtue and vice come by training and practice. We have the potential for virtue by nature, but it takes work to actually become virtuous.

Rousseau vs. Hobbes: A Case Based on Evidence in Experience

The issue of optimism vs. pessimism has to be settled not by emotional preference or prejudice but by evidence and argument. Here is a way to find evidence: To find out what is in man, let it come out. Give him freedom and power as catalysts to release whatever is in him. Both freedom and power are neutral, in that either can be used for good or evil. What are the effects on man when he is given more freedom and power? What are the effects when he is given less freedom and power? Assuming that modern democratic society, along with the advancements in technology, has given us more freedom and power than ever before in the history of man, we can then ask ourselves some important questions: Is modern man Better? More moral? Happier? Wiser? Less prone to suicide, despair, family and social breakdown? Less warlike and violent? Do we observe that power and freedom unlock more evil than good? Does power corrupt?

If we then look at situations where power and freedom have been *diminished*, what do we find? What was morality like during the Great Depression? What happens to morality in times of crisis or national emergency? Do we act better when suffering deprives us of freedom and power? Did 9-11 make us more heroic?

It seems that there is both surprising good and surprising evil in us, and that we seem more prone to evil the more we get what we want. Rousseau would seem to be refuted from this standpoint.

If power does corrupt, does suffering ennoble? Power, remember, is neutral, not evil, so the good or evil must come from us when we use power. And

suffering is neutral, not good in itself, and therefore the good or evil must come from us also when we experience suffering.

The answer seems to be that too much power or too much suffering is hard to take, but we do tend to act more virtuously under moderate poverty, or occasional emergencies. Human goodness seems to come out best when there is neither too much nor too little power, money, and freedom.

Arguments for Innate Goodness

If we didn't have innate goodness, we wouldn't know it. And if we didn't know it, we couldn't use it to judge evil by. So unless we were good, we could not recognize evil, even in ourselves. So the fact that we recognize and condemn evil in ourselves, even though we are evil, proves that we are also good. Why do we all agree that murder, torture, rape and cruelty are morally evil? If man is not ontologically good, why is harming him morally bad?

Why Is Man Ontologically Good?

Is the foundation of ontological goodness the creation of man in the image of God? Or is it based on evolution? Are we great because we are little gods that have fallen or because we are big apes that have risen? Could it be both?

What Is the Origin of Our Evil?

"Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."

If we are so good ontologically, why are we so bad morally? What is the origin of our evil? Four easy answers:

1. *We don't know the origin.*
2. *We aren't really evil at all. Evil is an illusion.*
3. *Society is to blame.*
4. *"The Devil made me do it."*

If these answers seem inadequate we are left with a more honest answer: our own free will. To find the origin of evil, look in the mirror.

Free Will/Free Choice

"Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage."

Why did God give us free will, if He knew we were going to misuse it? Because we can't be morally good without free choice either. Do we have free choice? If we believe we have free will, we must ask how it is compatible with the fact that we are conditioned by our heredity and our environment. And is free will compatible with fate or destiny? Modern thinkers tend to place emphasis on hereditary and environmental aspects while the ancients placed more weight on destiny. If we deny free will, however, you cannot reasonably judge or blame anyone. There is no moral responsibility if there is no free will. But if there is nothing like destiny, life seems to be just

‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ Free will and something like destiny both seem to be pre-suppositions of morality. No meaningful story can lack either of the two.

Summary:

Hobbes and Rousseau are important because they questioned assumptions of traditional views. Hobbes questioned innate human goodness and Rousseau questioned innate human badness. They opened more options and in so doing have enriched and greatly complicated our view of ourselves.

NOTES

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Bertram, Christopher. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Rousseau and the Social Contract*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Hobbes, Thomas, Richard E. Flathman (ed.), David Johnston (ed.). *Leviathan: An Authoritative Text : Backgrounds, Interpretations*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996.

Other Books of Interest

Morris, Christopher (ed.). *Social Contract Theorists: Critical Essays on Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Websites to Visit

1. http://www-gap.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/Mathematicians/Hobbes.html - A nicely organized website containing a short biography, facts about Hobbes, and links to other Hobbes' sites.
2. http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/r/rousseau.htm - Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy page on Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Lecture 10: Being Good and Being Scientific: Can Morality Be a Science? (Descartes, Hume, Mill)

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read René Descartes' *Discourse on Method* and John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*.

Science and Modern Philosophy

Three influential modern philosophers had one thing in common; the respect for science and the desire to do philosophy, including ethics, in a more scientific way. They were:

- ***René Descartes*** in the 17th Century. His philosophy is called RATIONALISM.
- ***David Hume*** in the 18th Century. His philosophy is called EMPIRICISM.
- ***John Stuart Mill*** in the 19th Century. His philosophy is called UTILITARIANISM.

Each one of these philosophies leads to the next one, in a kind of logical progression.

Science and Modern Society

The one feature that most distinguishes modern civilization from others is science. Pure science has given us more factual knowledge and technology (its offshoot) and has given us more power than any culture of the past ever had. Once the scientific "method" was discovered (in the Renaissance of the 16th and 17th centuries) there was no going back. When science became "provable" and gave reliable results, it became natural to ask whether or not it might help in ethics. For in a sense ethics is a science, because it seeks rational knowledge of something—good and evil—through causes and explanations. It is not an exact, mathematical science, or a physical science, but it is a science as philosophy is. If philosophy studies human behavior and judges and explains it by principles and laws, by arguing and trying to prove conclusions, ethics is a science. The question is: Can it be a science not just in this traditional, ancient sense, but in the new modern sense as well?

Descartes—"The Father of Modern Philosophy"

Descartes lived in the early 17th century, when all the sciences were flourishing and philosophy had been declining for centuries. Descartes asked himself why the sciences had progressed but philosophy had not. He wondered how he could refute the skepticism that came from Nominalism in the late Middle Ages, and give philosophy a new start. What was the secret of scientific progress and why had philosophy not imitated it? Descartes decided to ignore the past and look forward. As part of his method he chose to

deliberately doubt everything that his predecessors had assumed. To answer the skeptic, begin as a skeptic. Assume nothing. Descartes realized that the secret to science was indeed its method, and he thought that trying to apply this to philosophy could prove very fruitful.

Descartes' *Discourse on Method*

Descartes says the ancient philosophies were ". . . like magnificent temples. They laud the virtues and rightly make them more beautiful than anything else, but they are built on foundations of sand and mud," for they give no certain criteria or proofs for distinguishing good and evil. The new scientific method works as a strong foundation, he contends, but it should have something more than technology built upon it. Descartes called for moving the new scientific foundation under the old ethical temple.

Consider this . . .

Are there similarities between Descartes and Socrates? Were their goals the same or different?

The first thing Descartes does in his book, *Discourse on Method,* is to redefine reason more narrowly as scientific reason, then he tries to apply the new scientific method to philosophy. The first rule of Descartes' method was the same as the first rule of the scientific method:

Accept nothing as true until proved with certainty to be true.

Descartes, using this method of universal doubt, tries to prove first his own existence with the argument: "I think therefore I am." Then secondly that he is a mind; and then in the third place that there is a God. He tries to prove that there is a God by the concept of a perfect being in his mind, arguing by pure formal logic that the concept of total perfection must include the perfection of existing independent of our mind. Finally Descartes claimed to prove the reality of the material world and the validity of our sense perceptions of it, from the premise that if the instruments of knowing that we find in our very nature were deceptive, then God, the author of nature, would be a deceiver and not perfect.

Did Descartes Succeed?

Most philosophers agree that Descartes was a genius. Very few people, however, think he succeeded in proving what he tried to prove. Nor did he succeed in applying his methods to ethics. In the *Discourse on Method* he gave a purely provisional pragmatic ethic, a way to live safely and comfortably while building the new scientific ethical system, but he never got around to actually building it. He thought of himself as a scientist first and as a philosopher second.

Empiricism

Empiricism is a theory of knowledge, or epistemology, that is diametrically opposed to Descartes' Rationalism in many ways, though it shared Descartes' emphasis on the scientific. The difference is simple: Human knowledge evidently has two components:

1. The Senses

   and

2. The Mind

The Rationalists say only the mind can be trusted absolutely, and the senses must be judged by the mind. The Empiricist says that only the senses can be trusted because they alone give you data about the objective world, and that the mind must be judged by the senses, because hypotheses must be judged by the data in any science. Since reason and sensation are the two poles of our knowing, Rationalism and Empiricism are the two simplest contrasting epistemologies.

David Hume

David Hume (among others, like John Locke) was an Empiricist who reacted against Descartes' Rationalism. Hume insists that ideas are only less vivid copies of sense impressions, and that there is nothing in the mind that wasn't first in the senses. This leads to a crisis as far as ethics is concerned because ethics is not about anything we can sense. Good and evil have no shape or color or scientifically measurable qualities. So how does Hume account for our ethical ideas? His answer comes down to *emotions*. Our ethical ideas, he says, are in fact feelings.

The Emotive Theory of Values

When we see a mugger kill an old lady Hume says we haven't SEEN evil at all, only sense impressions: a knife, a cry, blood, etc. We may CALL it evil, but we don't SEE evil. Moral evil and good are both in our feelings. And unlike our sensations, our feelings are not objective, and do not reveal anything in the world outside of us. According to Hume, we project our subjective feelings onto the act and call it bad, if it has made us feel bad. The act, though, he says, is just physical, it is not good or bad. Ethics then is subjective, not objective, and can never become a science. Hume's Empiricism eliminates any knowledge of a real good and evil.

Three Other Conclusions of Hume's Empiricism

1. We must also deny the knowledge of causality, because we cannot derive it from sense impressions. We do not sense, for example, the causal connection between the bird and the egg. It is only mental habit that makes us connect them.
2. We do not sense the substance, or thing, or entity that possesses all the

sensible qualities that we perceive. We see the browness of the table, and feel its hardness, but no sense senses its tableness.

3. We never sense ourselves. We look within and all we find are thoughts, feelings, desires and choices. Not only are there no physical, material substances outside you, there is not even any non-physical substance inside of you. There is no substantial you.

Empiricism and Ethics

A.J. Ayer in his *Language, Truth and Logic,* along with the "Logical Positivists" or "Logical Empiricists," argued that if Hume is right, then all ethical statements, all propositions about good and evil, right and wrong, ought and ought not, are strictly meaningless. "Murder is wrong" can't be proved by sense data or by formal, mathematical logic. All ethics thus become expressions of personal, private, subjective feelings rather than intellectual claims or universally meaningful propositions that you can argue about.

Consider this . . .

How does the phrase "different strokes for different folks" fit into an Empiricist philosophy?

Problems with Logical Positivism

The principle that all meaningful propositions are either logical tautologies (self-proving, like equations) or empirically verifiable, contradicts itself, because it itself is neither a logical tautology nor empirically verifiable. Also, it's not empirical because we observe people all the time arguing about right and wrong, and they do not argue about feelings but about what is or is not objective fact. Ethics is not *about* our feelings, just as color is not about our seeing. *What* we see is color, what we calculate is math, what we believe is religion, and what we feel approving of, or guilty about, are moral good and evil. So subjective moral feelings are about objective moral facts, not vice versa. The fact that everyone argues about morality proves that either the emotive theory is wrong and everyone is right, or that the theory is right and everyone is wrong.

If ethics is about objective facts, then the question remains: Can ethics be done by the modern scientific method?

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism was invented by Jeremy Bentham and refined by John Stuart Mill, two 18th-century English philosophers. In his book, *Utilitarianism*, Mill claimed that you could do ethics by the modern scientific method. Science uses essentially two things in its method:

1. empirical observation

   and

2. mathematical measurement

1. Mill observes that everyone in fact desires happiness, and he identifies

happiness with pleasure, so it remains something empirical or something you can sense, feel, or observe. He then gets the notion of moral responsibility from the observed fact that our choices and actions affect other people and make them more happy or less happy.

2. He says that happiness can be measured, since you can have more of it or less of it. Therefore, he concludes, ethics can be scientific. The criterion for good and evil, says Mill, is: "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people." An act is good in so far as it produces happiness and bad in so far as it produces unhappiness. Mill identified happiness with pleasure, though unlike Bentham, he admitted that there are higher and lower pleasures. Thus he could say:

"It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied."—John Stuart Mill

But, essentially, Mill says that an act is good only because it makes people happy, that is, because of its consequences. This is known as *Consequentialism.* An act is good not because it obeys a good principle, a good moral law, but because it produces good consequences. This makes Utilitarianism scientific because consequences can be calculated and observed, while principles cannot.

Consider this . . .

If I am a sadist and you are a masochist, then would Mill say that there is nothing wrong with my torturing you? Or if nine cannibals ate one non-cannibal, would this produce "the greatest happiness for the greatest number?"

Ten Problems with Utilitarianism

1. It doesn't work in concrete situations. It is too simplistic. Utilitarianism thinks only of quantity of happiness, not of justice, or rights, or of what is right.
2. It's subjectivism. Its concept of happiness is merely subjective. But happiness is also something objective, so that we can speak meaningfully of "true happiness" or "false happiness." True happiness might even require some suffering. Utilitarianism eliminates heroism.
3. The Utilitarian wants to avoid metaphysics and stick to scientific calculation, but there is an implicit metaphysics in Utilitarianism: the metaphysics of Materialism, which identifies our greatest good with material pleasure. Utilitarians, for instance, are not neutral on questions of God and a spiritual soul, as they should be if they were only scientists.
4. If making moral evaluations depend on the *consequences* of our acts, Utilitarianism plays God: it claims to know the future. Its principles could justify anything—murder, cannibalism, lying—if only you think it will lead to greater happiness.

5. The Utilitarian has no answer for why one should be altruistic, why the greatest good should serve the greatest number of people.
6. Utilitarianism can't account for evil. Evil is reduced to wrong calculation of consequences.
7. It does not help us make sense of death. It's hard to die as a Utilitarian.
8. Its psychology is too simplistic. We don't want pleasure only. We have deeper desires.
9. It is universally condemned by good people. The better you are, the less you are a Utilitarian. If Utilitarianism is true, then truth and moral goodness contradict each other.
10. Utilitarianism lacks the whole ethical dimension. It just doesn't understand what ethics is. It reduces values to facts, like reducing color to black and white. It is morally color blind.

NOTES

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth and Logic*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1977.

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Hume, David, David Fate Norton and Mary J.Norton (eds.). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Mill, John Stuart, George Sher (ed.). *Utilitarianism*. 1863. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Grene, Marjorie. *Descartes*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1998

Mill, John Stuart, John M. Robson (ed.). *Autobiography*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1990.

Penelhum, Terence, *David Hume: An Introduction to His Philosophical System*. Ashland, OH: Purdue University Press, 1994.

Websites to Visit

1. http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/Mind/Table.html - Exhibition on René Descartes.
2. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/ - The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, David Hume.
3. http://www.jsmill.com/ - John Stuart Mill site.
4. http://www.utilitarianism.com - Utilitarianism site.

Lecture 11: Being Good and Being Fair: The Ethics of Kant

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Immanuel Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

Immanuel Kant was as much a child of the scientific Enlightenment as Descartes, Hume and Mill. He too saw science as the paradigm of human knowledge. He wrote three great books: *The Critique of Pure Reason; The Critique of Practical Reason;* and *The Critique of Judgment.* These dealt respectively with epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. However his most influential book was entitled *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals.* It is this much shorter book on ethics that will be explored in this lecture.

The Assumption of Ethics

The title is misleading for Kant's ethics like all philosophers', Kant's depend on his metaphysics, but in his case it depends on his *critique* of metaphysics. The technical term for Kant's ethics is "deontological" ethics. For Kant denied that ontology (meaning metaphysics) is possible.

Kant claimed that his Rationalist and Empiricist predecessors had both failed to explain how our minds could know truth because they assumed mistakenly that truth was the conformity of the mind to objective reality. He suggested otherwise.

A "Copernican Revolution in Philosophy"

Kant offered a radical redefinition of truth itself as reality's conformity to the mind and not vice versa. According to Kant, thought is like art rather than science in that it actively structures the world rather than passively mirroring it. It creates rather than discovers structure and meaning. The world is like cookie batter and the mind's categories are like cookie cutters, all the shape comes from the cutters and not from the batter. He agrees with Hume's basic premises that led Hume to skepticism, but he himself is not a skeptic, because he says that the job of thought is not to know objective reality but to MAKE the world's form and meaning.

This process of knowing by actively structuring the known world has three parts:

- The forms of sense perception: space and time.
- The categories of abstract logical thought
- The three most fundamental ideas of self, world and God.

All of these categories, according to Kant, are subjective rather than objective; that is, they are in the mind, though Kant says that they are in ALL

minds universally and necessarily. We only know appearance, not objective reality (which he called "things-in-themselves"), and we know these appearances by making them, every time we think.

Consider this . . .

Is it self-contradictory to say it is an objective truth that truth is not objective?

Kant and the "Ought"

When he turns to ethics Kant emphasizes the "ought" or obligation. His fundamental datum is that we are absolutely obliged to be morally good. What, then, is the ground of our absolute obligation to be moral? That is the question of *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. He writes:

> *"the ground of obligation . . . must . . . be sought not in the nature of man nor in the circumstances of the world in which man is placed, but must be sought* a priori *solely on the concepts of pure reason."*

For Kant's epistemology tells him that we do not know either the nature of man or the circumstances of the world as "things in themselves," so we can't base our ethics on either the first (as Plato and Aristotle did) or the second (as Mill did).

Three Initial Steps in Kant's Argument

1. He identifies the absolute good with a good will.

> *"There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world or even out of it which can be regarded as good without qualification except a good will. Intelligence, wit, judgment and whatever talents of the mind one might want to name are doubtless in many respects good and desirable, as are such qualities of temperament as courage, resolution, perseverance. But they can also become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which is to make use of these gifts of nature . . . is not good."*

Consider this . . .

Wasn't it Hitler's evil will that put to such evil use his otherwise good qualities of intelligence, perseverance, courage and resolution?

2. Kant then asks what makes a good will good. He answers:

> *"A good will is good not because of what it affects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e. it is good in itself."*

What kind of willing makes the will good? Kant says that it is a good motive. And the motive that makes the will good is duty. What Kant means by duty is respect for moral law, doing a thing simply because it is morally right, period. He contrasts duty, which is under the control of our will, with inclinations,

which are not. Feelings, he says, have no moral worth because they are not under our power.

> *". . . (men) preserve their lives to be sure in accordance with duty but not from the motive of duty. But if your life is so painful that your inclination is to kill yourself and yet you don't out of moral duty, then your self-preservation has moral worth."*

Kant's outlook is the opposite of Utilitarianism. He says an act is good because of what comes before it, because of the principle that motivates it.

Several Objections to the First Two Steps

Kant demands a pure motive of duty, unaided by inclination. But perhaps no such pure motive exists in this world. Kant's reply is that his claim is not about how good we are but about what moral goodness is. Like Plato in the *Republic,* he is trying to define a perfect ideal, not claiming that it is possible to reach it. But he also claims that it is *not* too idealistic to work. He asks, "Why is it that moral instruction accomplishes so little?" and answers that people do good because it is rewarded, and when the reward isn't there, they stop doing good. But even children understand that you should do a thing just because it is right.

Because of his epistemology, Kant does not believe we can abstract universal truths from individual examples met in sense experience. He thinks reason structures experience rather than learning from it. He therefore says:

> *"Imitation has no place at all in moral matters. And examples serve only for encouragement."*

Consider this . . .

Don't we in fact teach morality best by example?
How would Kant explain why that works?

3. Kant identifies moral duty with respect for moral law as such. This most general moral law he calls the "categorical imperative," or absolute moral obligation.

"There is only one categorical imperative and it is this: act only according to that maxim [principle] whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."—Immanuel Kant

In other words, do only what you want (will) everyone else to do, or "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Kant says we can deduce all moral duties from this one principle or "golden rule." We do not will robbery or murder or any other evil deed done to us. So if we only did what we willed to be a universal law, if we only did what we willed all people to do, we would do only good and not evil. Kant thinks this one law is all we need. And this law is purely formal, not dependent on specific content like human

nature or ten commandments. It is simply a law of justice and equality. Moral good is moral equality, doing what you will others to do, and all evil is inequality, wanting others to act differently than you. This is a simple, almost mathematical ethics—a science of ethics.

A Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

Persons are not merely subjective ends, whose existence has a value for us, but objective ends, i.e. ends in themselves, and should be treated as such.

"The practical imperative therefore will be the following: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in our own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, and never simply as a means."—Immanuel Kant

These two formulations of the categorical imperative are widely recognized as a landmark in ethical thought, as a basis for universal human rights and for a moral world order that transcends differences in religion, culture, history, race or temperament. His morality is not relative, subjective, utilitarian, pragmatic, negotiable, changeable or hypothetical. It is simply—*morality*. The first formulation of his "categorical imperative" is very much like the law of non-contradiction in logic while the second formulation gives us a humanism that is equally acceptable to atheists and theists, Muslims and Jews, Christians and Buddhists, liberals and conservatives.

Some Problems with the "Categorical Imperative"

1. The categorical imperative is abstract, in the sense that it doesn't tell us what or what not to do concretely and specifically. There is no substantive content.

   The categorical imperative in its first form tells you that being good is being logically consistent. It's not based on human nature, human needs, the nature of God, or the nature of anything real.

   But it does not allow for exceptional cases. How could celibacy be a moral choice, for instance? One couldn't will that for the whole human race.

Consider this . . .

If everyone wanted to torture animals, or to commit suicide, how would the categorical imperative forbid it?

2. A second problem with Kant concerns the motive of duty. Can motive be the one and only moral determinant? It may be the most important factor, but is it the only one? Traditional morality said there were three moral determinants: the act, the motive or intention, and the circumstances. Legalism says that there is just one determinant: the objective act.

Utilitarianism says there is just one: the circumstances, which determine the consequences. Kant also says there is just one determinant; the subjective intention. Isn't this just as one sided as legalism or utilitarianism?

3. He makes duty the only moral motive. Common sense says that there is also moral worth in right inclinations, especially in, for example, instinctive love which doesn't take any deliberate active will. If the mother's instinctive love for her baby is lacking, we find it not only biologically unnatural but also morally blameworthy.
4. Do we love persons because we love principles the most, and our principles tell us to love persons? Or do we love principles because we love persons the most, and principles define how to love persons?

Consider this . . .

Does a husband remain faithful because he loves his wife or because he loves the categorical imperative?

5. Kant's morality is one of equality: the right is what everyone should do. But what about making an exception for yourself if you want to do MORE than your duty? How could Kant explain the moral worth of heroic actions? Why do we call them 'actions that go beyond the call of duty'? Is it our duty to go beyond the call of duty? Logically, Kant must deny that heroism has any moral worth, or must say that it is everyone's duty to be a hero and go beyond the call of duty, which is illogical, not to mention burdensome for all.
6. Kant cannot account for the fact that the better you are the more joy you get in doing good. If two people refuse to do evil but the saint finds joy in not doing evil and the sinner finds pain in not doing evil, do you say that there is less moral worth in the saint because he is happy? Kant ignores human nature and only looks at human deeds, and then only at the motives for the deeds. What about character?

Three Necessary Postulates

There are three postscripts that Kant adds to his categorical imperative, that he says are presuppositions of morality: God, freedom and immortality. He doesn't think we can prove any of these things and therefore argues that we cannot know whether they exist or not, but we must act as if they did in order to be fully moral.

Kant insists that God is the ideal but not the ground of morality. He says that it is man's will, not God's will, that is the source and origin and cause of moral law. Kant calls this the "autonomy of the will." But how can our will be both over and under the law, both the creator of the moral law and subject to it?

Consider this . . .

If God, or freedom or immortality does NOT exist, should we believe they do in order to justify morality? Should we live a lie in order to live well?

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Kant, Immanuel, Lewis W. Beck (trans.). *Immanuel Kant: Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Harlow, Essex, United Kingdom: Pearson Education, 1989.

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Websites to Visit

1. http://www.csus.edu/indiv/m/mccormickm/kantbio.html - California State University at Sacramento, Dr. Matt McCormick's Philosophy Site, Article on Immanuel Kant written for the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
2. http://www.friesian.com/kant.htm - A short biography of Kant with many links and a list of his writings.

Lecture 12: Being Good and Being Secular: Can an Atheist Be Ethical? The Ethics of Jean-Paul Sartre

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism and Human Emotions*.

Freedom and God

Jean-Paul Sartre, perhaps the most intellectual atheist writer in history, centered his ethics around two ideas;

The reality of freedom

The unreality of God

He had a radically new concept of freedom. He didn't see freedom as the freedom to choose to obey or disobey a moral law but freedom absolutely—freedom from all law and constraint, freedom to *make* moral law and to *create* values. And he used this notion of freedom and the notion of atheism to prove each other; there can't be a God because otherwise I would not be totally free, and I am totally free because there is no God.

Free Will and Metaphysical Freedom

Among the many kinds of freedom, the two that must be defined and distinguished in order to understand Sartre are free will and metaphysical freedom.

Free Will: The history of Western philosophy gives us three options with regards to free will—to assume it, to deny it, or to prove it. Most of the ancients assumed it without labeling it or defining it. A few ancients and many more modern thinkers are determinists, who deny free will and say that everything happens by necessity. And the mainstream Judaeo-Christian view affirms, defines, and defends it.

Metaphysical Freedom: Although some philosophers had affirmed free will and some denied it, none affirmed the kind of freedom that Sartre did, which can be called "metaphysical freedom."

This new notion of freedom comes directly from his metaphysics. And the key idea in his metaphysics is what he calls the distinction between "being IN itself" and "being FOR itself." This is essentially the difference between objects (being in itself) and subjects (being for itself). In other words, things and persons. Things have essences that can be expressed in definitions, persons do not. There is no such thing as human essence or human nature. Man is totally free of boundaries or definitions. He can make himself whatever he wills to make himself. He creates his own essence.

The Formula: "Existence Precedes Essence"

This is the origin of the term "existentialism," which Sartre invented. By "essence" he means "definable nature," something confined within limits. (A

triangle is confined within three sides, an acorn is confined within the species of 'oak,' etc.) By "existence" Sartre means only human existence, not the existence of a thing. We have a unique way of existing, he says: We are subjects, not objects; we are being-for-itself, conscious and free, not objects of consciousness or free choice.

"My entire philosophy is an attempt to draw all the consequences of a consistent atheistic position."—Jean-Paul Sartre

How God Plays (or doesn't play) a Part

All of this is based on Sartre's assumption that there is no God. If we believe in God, then we can believe that man has an essence or human nature and a meaning and value because he is an object of God's knowledge and will. But if you do not believe in God, "there is no human nature because there is no God to conceive it" and no meaning and purpose to human life because there is no God to will it. This is what Sartre means when he says that existence precedes essence. There is no design for man as there is for things like rocks or acorns or animals which have a design/essence even though, he says, they just evolved by chance. The "lives" of things are all predictable and follow a script. But humans follow no script. We are free from essence and thus can create our own essence. This is metaphysical freedom. He argues that this is the only philosophy that gives man freedom and dignity and does not reduce him to an object.

Consider this . . .

How would Jewish, Christian, or Muslim philosophers argue against this and allow for the concept of human freedom and dignity?

The freedom Sartre means, remember, is not just free will. Our very nature is not given to us, by God or by nature, but by our own choices or will (our "being-in-itself"). Sartre says that receiving anything is incompatible with being free, whether that anything is your nature, your values, a gift, or even love, which Sartre denies is possible.

"Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing"

Life then is strictly meaningless or "absurd," says Sartre. For nothing justifies any of the arbitrary meanings we give to it. There are no eternal objective truths to judge our changeable subjective opinions, since there is no divine mind for them to be in. And there are no objective values to judge our choices, since there is no divine will for them to come from.

Reasons to Study Sartre

Whether you are an atheist or not, it is important to study Sartre for several reasons. First, it shows you the logical consequences of an idea (in this case

atheism) and proves that ideas do have consequences both in theory and in practice. Secondly, by studying Sartre you can also appreciate the alternatives to his philosophy if you do not agree with him. Perhaps you can appreciate the idea of God more when he is taken away, much as you always regret not appreciating someone enough when they were alive. Thirdly, studying Sartre constitutes a test for the relation between ethics and religion. Can there be an atheistic ethics? Is ethics dependent upon religion? Fourth, Sartre presents an existential challenge, the challenge to each one's personal life and existence.

Consider this . . .

Is it better to honestly face the question whether life has any meaning or not, even at the risk of giving the negative answer to that question, than to cover it up and refuse to ask the question?

Nausea

In Sartre's novel, *Nausea,* the protagonist, Roquentin, makes five experiments trying to find the meaning and purpose of life.

- He searches as a historian for meaning in truth.
- He tries to find meaning in a life of wild adventures.
- He looks for meaning in humanism.
- He studies human love to see if it gives life purpose.
- He contemplates suicide.

The Experiment of Love

All the experiments undertaken by Roquentin in *Nausea* fail, but one experiment bears further investigation: Love. Sartre admits that if genuine love were possible, love of the other for the other's sake, then that would make life meaningful. But he denies that this is possible. He says he has never experienced it either by giving it or receiving it. In his play, *No Exit,* each character craves love but each one is unlovable and dishonest. Sartre is saying that what everyone needs absolutely is to be known and to be loved, but he says that this love is impossible for the same reason God is impossible: it would be the synthesis of "being in itself" and "being for itself." We are always imperfect and therefore unlovable. The things that can love—persons—are not perfectly lovable, and the things that are perfect and perfectly lovable—ideals, concepts, essences, objects—cannot love.

Consider this . . .

How does Sartre justify his belief that there only exists two kinds of love, sadism or masochism?

What Are the Ethical Consequences of Sartre's Atheism?

Goodness is subjective, man made, arbitrary, non-justifiable. There are no universal moral principles and we therefore can never be sure whether any

one choice is good or evil. The right thing to do is not definable by any universal rules but is entirely up to the individual.

"We can never choose evil," since we create the value of our choices by our act of choosing them. What I do may be evil to you, but it is good to me and that's why I did it. There is no pre-existing moral law that can judge anyone's choice as really evil.

Ethics is creative, like art. We are not only free to choose our *actions*, with free will, but also free to create whatever *value* we choose to create. Ethics, then, is nothing like science.

There is no such thing as progress because progress means betterment, and that means getting closer to a real good. But there is no real goal or good. To judge of something that it progresses is to presuppose that it is getting closer to a real goal. And that goal must be stable and unchanging, otherwise there can be no progress toward it. Many people who call themselves "progressives" say they do not believe in any static, changeless truths or principles. Sartre sees a logical self-contradiction here. If there are no changeless goals, the very idea of progress toward them makes no sense.

"There are no eternal truths because there is no eternal divine mind to think them."—Jean-Paul Sartre

Humanists Offended

Sartre says to his fellow secular humanists that he does not agree with their strategy. They want to do away with God as an unscientific and harmful idea but want to at the same time retain the notion of absolute values and unchangeable moral principles. Sartre says that this morality makes no sense, for metaphysical reasons. If there is no God, there are profound consequences that follow for morality.

The humanist "wants to get rid of God with the least possible expense. Something like this: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, and we are discarding it, but in order for values to be taken seriously, there must be some *a priori* goods. It must be good *a priori* to speak the truth, not beat your wife, to have children, etc."

BUT says Sartre:

> *"The existentialist, on the contrary, finds it very distressing that God doesn't exist, because all possibility of finding meaning in some heaven of ideas disappears along with God. There can be no* a priori *good because there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it."*

Freedom vs. Meaning:

Sartre sees that our deepest need is not freedom but meaning, and he thinks these two are incompatible. He states:

"God does not exist and as a result everything is permissible. And therefore man is in despair, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to."

Either we have total freedom because there is no God and therefore no real objective meaning, and no pre-set values to limit our freedom; or else we have only limited freedom but an objective meaning because there is a God. In Sartre's world no one can never be wrong, because everything is permissible, and everything is permissible because there is no God. And because there is no wrong, there is no right either, and as a result we are in despair, since life is meaningless and absurd.

Sartre is an example of a tough-minded philosopher and a tough-minded atheist. He is an atheist because he thinks it is true, not because atheism helps him to be good, or to find meaning, or to overcome despair, or to be happy. He is not a "tender-minded" atheist who chooses atheism because he thinks its useful, or a way to overcome frustration and guilt and old-fashioned ideas.

Consider this . . .

Can you give examples of the following: a tender-minded atheist; a tough-minded theist; a tender-minded theist?

Sartre for all his apparent pessimism seems to have learned the all important Lesson One—the primacy of truth. Honesty is an absolutely absolute. To live as if God existed even if perhaps he doesn't seems dishonest. Sartre chooses to live in despair, but to live there honestly.

NOTES

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

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Other Books of Interest

Barrett, William E. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1976.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, Lloyd Alexander (trans.). *Nausea*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1976.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, S. Gilbert and I. Abel (trans.). *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1989.

Websites to Visit

1. http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/sartre.htm - Basic biography of Sartre including a list of his works, quotations, and many lesser-known facts.
2. http://www.tameri.com/csw/exist/sartre.asp - A very well-organized and detailed site on Jean-Paul Sartre. It has a comprehensive biography, a complete listing of his books, plays, and writings, and links to other Sartre sites.

Lecture 13: Being Good in Eastern Ethics

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Beiard T. Spalding's *Life and Teaching of the Masters of the Far East*.

If ethics is universal, if it depends on universal laws or universal reason, then one should look to the East as well as the West, for the same reason that one should look at the past as well as the present.

East vs. West

In the West, philosophy in general, and ethics in particular, distinguished itself from religion, largely due to Socrates and his successors. In the East there was no Socrates and so ethics in particular, and philosophy in general, is not regarded as a purely rational science but is more closely tied to religion.

Consider this . . .

How are Eastern religions fundamentally different in their ideas of God than the three main Western religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism)?

The Four Major Religions of the East and Ethics

The four most influential, lasting and popular religions in the East are:

1. Hinduism
2. Buddhism
3. Confucianism
4. Taoism

Each of these religions contains a moral code, and though each differs greatly on theoretical questions like the nature of God, they don't differ very much on practical questions, or how one should live one's life. Yet, although the *content* of ethics in Eastern religions traditions is similar to the content of ethics in Western religions, the *status* of ethics in these religions is different. In Western religions morality comes from the 'top,' that is to say God. The ultimate reason for human morality in the West is the nature of God. This isn't found in the Eastern religions. The purpose for morality here is to wipe the bad dust off the mirror of the human mind so that we can see God and have a mystical experience. The goal of Eastern religion is mysticism and the goal of Western religion is sanctity. In the East, the moral will has to be purified so that the mind is clear. In the West, man has to be enlightened so that the will is better.

1. Hinduism

In Hinduism the ultimate reality is called Brahman. Brahman is a person in some forms of the religion, and in others it is not a person, but the one and

only reality, of which we are all manifestations. The ultimate end of Hinduism is realizing our unity with Brahman, realizing that in the depths of our soul, known as Atman, that we are all one, and that the one we really are is Brahman, God, infinite and absolute and indefinable perfection. The formula for this is:

"Thou Art That" /
"Tat Tvam Asi" = Atman is Brahman

The Road to Brahman

There are four different roads to Brahman. These roads are more precisely called YOGAS, which means deeds, or works, or ways of life. Each of these yogas is an interior journey of self-discovery that leads to Atman and thus to Brahman, and each is for different personalities. Each has its own moral code and each code is similar—purification from all kinds of evil and impurity and selfishness—but the psychological emphases differ:

Jnana yoga is a mental, intellectual path by which you learn to understand yourself differently and learn to detach your thoughts from your body and your ego and its desires.

Karma yoga is a path to Brahman through ordinary daily work and fulfilling your duties with a new motive, sheer obedience to your Karma or fate.

Bhatki yoga is a personal, emotional path of love and attachment to Brahman instead of yourself.

Raja yoga is a careful, difficult, experimental and detailed path, that combines elements of all the others.

Ethics on the Paths

While the focus for each path differs slightly, they all have the same goal: detachment from ordinary selfishness and selfconsciousness and attainment of unselfishness and unselfconsciousness. Some Hindus believe that when you reach your goal, you see that you simply *are* Brahman, while other Hindus believe that you then attain union *with* Brahman, a kind of spiritual marriage.

Reincarnation

The major specific difference between Hindu ethics and most Western ethics concerns the value of individual human life. For Hindus this life is not the only one, so a man dying is only passing out of one body and will soon get another one, by reincarnation. Reincarnation states that after you die your soul gets another human body and comes back to Earth to learn the lessons you didn't learn last time, to fulfill your karma, your destiny and cosmic justice, to reap the rewards for virtue and punishments for vice from your last life. Hindus believe that we should fear death less, and love life less, then we naturally do because both are only temporary and repeatable.

Consider this . . .

What are the primary differences between the Christian idea of the Incarnation and the Hindu idea of Reincarnation?

There is a great difference between the East and the West because of this concept of reincarnation. India tends to be a patient country while the West which believes "you only go around once in life," is impatient. The West has more hospitals *and* more wars. Western ethics emphasizes right action. It is more involved and practical. Hindu ethics emphasizes right understanding. It is more detached and contemplative.

2. Buddhism

Buddhism is an offshoot of Hinduism, a kind of simplified and purified Hinduism. Buddha's ethics, summarized in his "Noble Eightfold Path," is in many ways similar to raja yoga, but Buddhism rejects the Hindu theory of Brahman and Atman. It says that our belief that we have souls, or egos, or selves stems from our practice of selfish desire. If we stopped desiring, we would stop thinking there was anyone there doing the desiring. So the ultimate end of all Buddhist ethics is to stop all selfish desire, to purify our thoughts and
actions from selfishness, in order to reach the state of consciousness called Nirvana. Nirvana means 'extinction.' Once you reach Nirvana you are not good or bad, you simply are not. So even though there is a strict ethics on the Noble Eightfold Path to reach Nirvana, and one that is similar to much of Western ethics, it exists only to be transcended; it is not a way of perfecting the self but of destroying it, or rather destroying the illusion that there is a self.

The Four Noble Truths

The essence of Buddhism, as summarized by Buddha himself in the 6th Century B.C. is The Four Noble Truths:

- All life is infected with "dukkha," or suffering. To live is to suffer.
- The cause of suffering is greed, or "tanha." We have selfish desires, and that sets up a gap between desire and satisfaction, and that gap is what suffering is: wanting what you don't have.
- To eliminate the effect, eliminate the cause. The way to extinguish suffering is to extinguish selfish desire. Nirvana is the cure.
- The prescription for this cure is the Noble Eightfold Path. Life is divided into eight aspects and egotism is deliberately reduced to zero in each.

Buddhism is a way of salvation, but not salvation from sin as Christianity is, but from suffering. There is no notion of sin, divine law, or a personal God in Buddhism. The ultimate purpose of the Buddhist ethics of the Noble Eightfold Path is not to be virtuous or charitable or happy or pleasing to God,

but to transform our desires and our consciousness so that we can escape suffering and illusion and find Nirvana.

Wisdom and Compassion

The two greatest virtues for Buddhists are wisdom and compassion, or *pranja* and *karuna.* Wisdom means enlightenment, which consists in seeing your identity with everything else, overcoming the habitual illusion of distinct individuality; and compassion means feeling one with all suffering beings and overcoming the habitual desires of the separate self.

***Karuna* Is Not the Same as *Agape* (Charity)**

Buddhist compassion is not the same as Christian charity, which is active and personal. They both negate the same thing (selfishness) but do not affirm the same thing. *Karuna* is the feeling of empathy with all suffering beings, which is a matter of feeling and thought and intuition. *Agape* is active love, willing the good of the other. *Agape*, is a matter of the will. Both *karuna* and *agape* are to be given to all people, both good and bad, but *karuna* is to be given to animals too, since they suffer also.

Some Conclusions:

In Buddhism as well as Hinduism there is not the great priority put on human life and individuality and certainly not on human bodily salvation, that there is in the West. The Buddhist sees the human body as a boat and the sailor is apparently the soul or self or ego. Since there really is no ego we are empty boats, driven by the wind. Since there is no one there, there is no one to hate and when we see this, we no longer hate. We *can* no longer hate. But the price you have to pay for this is that there is also no one there to love.

3. Confucianism

Confucian ethics is much less mystical than Hindu or Buddhist ethics, and much more practical and political. Its central idea is harmony. Justice does not mean equality or rights, but a kind of social music, each person singing the note that is right for them. Confucius took this central idea of harmony and constructed a social ethic that transformed China from a period of civil war to relative peace and unity for over 2000 years until Mao Zedong destroyed it and replaced it with the opposite philosophy of Communism, based on class conflict. Confucius' influence is unparalleled in history: he was the single most successful thinker in the field of social ethics in the history of the world.

Some Differences Between Confucianism and the West

1. In a Confucian society everything is done with elaborate and precise correctness. There is a right way to address your older brother which is different from the way to address your older sister, which is different than the way to address your younger brother, etc.
2. In Confucian ethics the basic unit is not the individual but the family.

The individual is subordinated to family and social roles and patterns of acting, like dancers at a formal ball. Preserving family loyalties and structures is primary while individual happiness is secondary.

3. There is a much greater emphasis in a Confucian society than in the West on tradition and respect for the old. Confucianism envies the old more than the young because it values what the old are better at—wisdom—more highly than what the young are better at—pleasure or health.
4. Where the West places an emphasis on distinguishing things, clearly and logically (the Creator and the creation, good and evil, etc.), the East, and especially Confucianism, is flexible and has a talent for mediation and compromise.

Consider this . . .

America has 4% of the world's people but 75% of the world's lawyers, while China has 20% of the world's people but only 1% of the world's lawyers. Why do you think this is so?

4. Taoism

Taoism is opposite to Confucianism in many ways. Its founder Lao Tzu was a romantic and a mystic while Confucius was a rational pragmatist. Lao Tzu was leaving civilized China, disenchanted with the rules and regulations of Confucianism, when the gatekeeper at the Great Wall refused to let him through until he paid, not in money, but in wisdom. Lao Tzo agreed to this 'tariff' and wrote 81 short poems, gave them to the gatekeeper, and left, never to be heard from again. Those 81 poems constitute the *Tao Te Ching,* the second most popular book in the world next to the Bible. ("Ching" means "book," "Te" means "spiritual power," and "Tao" means "way."

The concept of Tao has three dimensions:

- The way ultimate reality works
- The way nature works in its manifestation of ultimate reality
- The way of the wise individual and the wise society that imitates the way of nature, as nature imitates the Tao

This pattern is similar to Christian charity and Hindu/Buddhist mysticism in that it is selfless, or self-giving. The greatest power, or "te," according to Taoism, is in the feminine side of our being, or in our womblike receptivity. Rigid things die, flexible things live. The favorite Taoist model in nature is water. It always goes to the lowest place and it has no form of its own, as it takes the form of its container. But it is the source of all life, and its waves, dashing themselves to extinction on the hard rocks, are not changed by the rocks, but the rocks are changed and turned to sand by the patient water.

The *Tao Te Ching* says that "nature is a sacred vessel and that those who only want to use her do not succeed."

Consider this . . .

When the first Japanese mountain climbing team conquered Everest, they stopped 50 feet from the summit and went back down, out of respect for the mountain. Asked why, they said, "We did not climb to conquer Everest but to befriend her." Do you think this is wise or foolish? Why?

Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang are the basic polarity found everywhere in nature, the law of opposites: hot and cold, day and night, male and female and ultimately, life and death: Western ethics is life-affirming and death-denying. It is an either/or ethics
of *choice*. But Eastern ethics, and
especially Taoism, takes its model from nature and the law of Yin and Yang, not only concerning light and dark but even life and death. In Taoism, life and death are not enemies but allies. At the heart of life there is death and as soon as we are born we begin to die.

East vs. West:

In Eastern philosophies ultimate reality is beyond moral good and evil. This Oriental metaphysics has great ethical consequences. In this philosophy, you don't take the difference between good and evil with absolute seriousness, just relative seriousness. In the West, ultimate reality, is infinitely good and not evil. God does not have a dark side. The meaning of life is Him, or being like Him, or surrender to His will, etc. So morality is taken with ultimate seriousness, because moral goodness is not relative, like biological goodness or physical goodness. Whether in pre-Christian classical, Christian, or post-Christian humanist form, the West tends toward moral absolutism. Even if everything in the physical universe is relative, morality is not relative to immorality as Yin to Yang.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Spalding, Beiard T. *Life and Teaching of the Masters of the Far East* (Six Volume Set). Los Angeles, CA: DeVorss and Co., 1997.

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Confucius, D.C. Lau and Arthur Waley (trans.). *Analects of Confucius*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1979.

Lao-Tzu, Stephen A. Mitchell (trans.). *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

Mitchell, Stephen. *Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation*. New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2002.

Suzuki, Daisetz T. *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Berkeley, CA: Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 1976.

Websites to Visit

1. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/2 - Stanford University website contains a biography of Confucius, a narrative on his philosophy, a bibliography and links to other sites on Confucianism.
2. http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Philosophy/Taichi/lao.html - A short biography with some of the poetry of Lao-Tzu and links to other Taoist sites.
3. http://www.hindunet.org/ - Not unlike the Buddhist site above, this address is a primary source for all things Hindi.

Lecture 14: Final Questions: Who's to Say Who's Right?

Before beginning this lecture you may want to . . .

Read Peter Kreeft's *A Refutation of Moral Relativism: Interviews with an Abosolutist*.

How should we assimilate and personalize what we have learned from each philosopher and his philosophy? What, as a single individual, are you to learn from these very different minds? The answers have been many and different and apparently contradictory to one another, so who's to say who's right? The most authentic reason for asking this question is not just to give a skeptical reason for intellectual laziness but to recognize an honest confusion and doubt and to seek some clarification or even some answer to it.

Two Questions

1. Can we reconcile and relate the insights from so many different philosophical positions? If so, how?
2. How are you expected to profit from knowing these various philosophies? How are you a better person after you study them than you were before?

We hear many different voices, but is it cacophony or harmony that we hear? Perhaps the very seeming disharmony is in fact harmony. Disagreements may make up the best harmony. One of the glories of Western Civilization is that it fosters this pluralism of philosophy. Only free minds can produce such a diversity of ideas and thus confusion. We must "agree to disagree." But what happens when these philosophies are clearly contradictory?

Consider this . . .

Is Machiavelli in Plato's cave or is Plato in it with Machiavelli out in the sunshine?

There are real, deep, and important differences between different philosophies about good and evil, and these are things to be passionate about. Many wars have been waged throughout history because of disagreements over basic philosophical ideas. It's a false conclusion though, that if we are passionate seekers of the truth about the good, we must necessarily translate this mental and spiritual passion into physical violence. How can we avoid this?

Religion and Violence

In recent times, religion seems, to some degree, to have succeeded in doing just that—at least to a far greater extent than in the past. Perhaps this can be a model for philosophy too. How has this success come about? Two possible answers:

1. The separation of Church and State, of Religion and Politics. This guarantees the freedom and independence of religion as well as politics. Should the philosopher then opt for the separation of ethics and politics? Crucial and controversial ethical issues (cloning, abortion, euthanasia, polygamy, etc.) are public issues, and the State must judge yes or no to them. Thus it cannot be neutral as it can more easily be with regards to religion.
2. Until modern times nearly everyone assumed that religions contradicted one another—that if one was right the others were wrong. Philosophers called this position *exclusivism.* Two alternatives to this have become popular among philosophers today:

   Inclusivism claims that though religions seem to contradict one another, deep down they really don't. The inclusivist says that the mountain of truth includes all the religions as roads to the summit.

   Pluralism claims that we cannot know whether the inclusivist or the exclusivist is right. We can't know, in the last analysis, whether religions contradict each other or not, because we don't have the last analysis.

These two answers do not help with philosophy. Philosophy uses reason, not faith, as its means of knowing, and on the level of reason, different ethical philosophies certainly do contradict each other. Because of the use of logical reasoning in philosophy, we have means for discovering errors in philosophy, and these logical means, unlike faith, are common to everyone.

3. A third cause in the decline of religious wars however seems to be applicable to philosophical ethics:

Philosophy and the Art of Dialogue

What one learns in philosophy is truth, and truth never contradicts truth. Yet while philosophers contradict each other, you learn from all of them. How is this possible? Philosophy has taught the art of listening and learning from each other when we disagree, of demanding a deeper understanding of the other side before judging or acting. Each philosopher learned from his predecessor with whom he disagreed. Without their predecessors, no philosopher could philosophize. Philosophers who learn from history are like "dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants." If they see farther than their predecessors it is only because they have their shoulders to stand on. At the very least, an opposing philosophy helps you to appreciate and define your own philosophy by contrast.

Consider this . . .

How could each of the following pairs learn from each other?

Atheist / Theist

Aristotelian / Kantian

Optimist / Pessimist

An opponent can help you modify and improve your philosophy by showing you something your philosophy didn't see. Every critic, however wrong he might be, is also right about something. Even the philosophy of Nazism had to begin with certain ideals (patriotism, honor, order, purity) before it could twist them to horrible ends.

Apparent contradictions may often not be what they seem. Two opposed philosophers may be using the same term in different ways ("happiness," for instance), so that they may be complementary rather than contradictory.

Rational Eclecticism

You needn't agree with everything a philosopher says to agree with some of it. You can be a rational eclectic. You need not choose one philosopher alone to follow. You can construct your own philosophy, and all the philosophers will help you to construct different parts of it.

Another Answer to the Contradictions Between Philosophers

Logical contradictions may be real, but we do not think only logically or illogically. Sometimes we think non-logically, or intuitively. We have a right brain as well as a left, and the right works more by analogy and intuition while the left works digitally, like a computer. Even within left-brain thinking we often meaningfully and profitably embrace contradictions. The union of two contradictory ideas can in fact happen. The synthesis of logically unsynthesisable ideas happens in your mind. In objective fact this does not happen but in the subjective mind both can exist because you a person are not just an object or an idea; you have dimensions that the world simply does not have. No 'idea' can think, but you can. No 'idea' can change, but you can. This adds a temporal dimension to the law of non-contradiction. Just as two bodies cannot occupy the same space *at the same time*, neither can two contradictory ideas occupy the same mental space at the same time, but they can at different times. Even though you cannot believe contradictory ideas at the same time, you can change your mind and believe those contradictory ideas at two different times. For instance, you can be both a Platonist and a Machiavellian: a Platonist while reading Plato and a Machiavellian while reading Machiavelli.

Consider this . . .

Socrates, Jesus and Buddha were all constantly counseling their followers to change their mind, yet all three believed in unchanging truth. Why is that not a contradiction?

Our minds are not unchanging truth, they are truth seekers. We are not wisdom, but lovers of wisdom, and love is always changing and growing. The human mind is not limited to four dimensions, and all of the philosophies we study come from the human mind, not from the physical four dimensional world. We need psychological wisdom and the experience of human life and

intuitive understanding of human nature as well as logical consistency. Our multi-dimensional reality can often be shown most clearly not through a philosopher's work, but through literature. Psychologists and philosophers explain, but novelists show. Philosophers give us useful roadmaps, but novelists give us the car and take us on a journey. To fulfill Socrates' dictum, "know thyself," read the great stories. Read Homer and Shakespeare and the Bible and Dostoevski. From this experience you can then see how to learn from all the philosophers even though their propositions contradict one another. Life is not a philosophy but a story with rich variety and contrary characters, and these contrary characters exist within you.

Second Question: What Profit Does One Get from This Study of Ethics and Philosophy?

For one thing, even if you have not found any answers you have most certainly found some questions. Raising questions is much more profitable and much more difficult than we think. Once we do this, finding answers is much easier than we think.

"Seek and you will find."

What difference can abstract philosophy make to your practical life? Abstract ideas have concrete consequences.

Consider this . . .

"All previous history is the history of class conflict."

How did this philosophical idea make a difference to the people of Russia and China?

What did the concept of "Liberty, Fraternity, Equality" do for the French?

The three most important decisions you ever make in your life all depend upon your philosophy:

- Which God to believe in, if any. A good God or a bad God? A God beyond good and evil? An absolute or non-absolute God?
- Which person to marry, if any. What kind of person do you want to be most totally and intimately bound to forever?
- What career to work at, if any. What you do also reveals what you are.

All three choices depend on one's philosophy of what is good and what is bad. These three decisions stay with us until our deathbed.

Conclusions:

The richness and diversity of Western culture can assimilate and use even its enemies. At the heart of this civilization stand the two most influential people that ever lived—Socrates and Jesus. Both conquer their enemies by making them their friends. This is why both are immortal. If we can all start in the same place with the Socratic conviction that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and the passionate, uncompromising desire for honesty, then we have the hope of ending in the same place even if we travel by very different roads.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Suggested Reading

Kreeft, Peter. *A Refutation of Moral Relativism: Interviews with an Absolutist*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Kreeft, Peter. *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes: Life as Vanity, Job: Life as Suffering, Song of Songs: Life as Love*. Ft. Collins, Colorado: Ignatius Press, 1989.

Websites to Visit

1. http://philosophers.org/WesternPhilosophy.html - Well-organized and detailed site with links to just about anything dealing with philosophy.

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